If you think your child is too young to need a dentist, you’re wrong—her teeth are at risk long before she’s tasted her first piece of candy.

When Karen Rice, of Aston, Pennsylvania, took her 4-year-old son, Luke, to the dentist for a checkup, she was shocked. He had a large cavity in one of his molars. Soon afterward, Luke complained that his teeth hurt, and the dentist found three more cavities between his teeth. “One was so big that the tooth got infected and had to be pulled,” says Rice, who’s endured five root canals herself.

Parents often assume that kids get cavities because they’re lax about brushing and flossing. That’s true to an extent, but what few people know is that tooth decay is a disease known as dental caries that’s caused by specific
Babies
- Clean your baby’s gums even before her first teeth erupt. Wipe them with a damp washcloth after feedings.
- Start brushing as soon as the first tooth appears. Wet a baby toothbrush and gently rub it back and forth on the surface of the tooth and along the gum line. If you use toothpaste, make sure it’s fluoride-free.

Toddlers
- Brush your child’s teeth for at least 30 seconds (ideally a minute) after breakfast and before bed. Lean her head on your lap and place the brush at a 45-degree angle to the tooth.
- Start using a tiny amount of fluoride toothpaste when she’s 2 or 3 years old.
- Begin flossing teeth for him when two of his teeth are touching.

Preschoolers
- Brush your own teeth at the same time as your child brushes, and give him lots of positive feedback.
- Studies have found that manual toothbrushes are just as effective as powered ones. But if letting your kid use an electric or battery-operated one makes it easier to get her to brush, go for it.

School-Age Kids
- Your child can start brushing and flossing on her own at around age 3. If she can tie her own shoes, chances are she’s ready to brush solo. She should now brush for two minutes.
- Look for food and plaque around the gum line of her teeth to see whether she’s doing a sufficient job. You can also let her chew gum with Xylitol.

Tooth decay begins with a group of germs called mutans streptococcus. “The bacteria feed on sugar and produce acid that eats away at the structure of teeth by depleting calcium,” explains Parents advisor Burton Edelstein, D.D.S., founding director of the Children’s Dental Health Project. The bacteria also create plaque—a yellowish film that builds up on teeth and contains even more enamel-eroding acid. Once an area without calcium becomes big enough, the surface of the tooth collapses, and that’s a cavity.

Babies are born without any of these harmful bacteria in their mouth, and studies have proven that moms (rather than dads) typically infect their children before age 2. It happens when you transfer your saliva into your child’s mouth—by repeatedly eating from the same spoon as your baby, for example, or letting your toddler brush his teeth with your toothbrush. And if you’ve frequently had cavities yourself, you’re particularly likely to pass the germs along. Once a child’s mouth has become colonized with mutans streptococcus, he’ll be prone to cavities in his baby and permanent teeth that can cause pain and difficulty eating. “It’s an old wives’ tale that ‘soft teeth’ run in families, but what’s really passed along in families are high levels of decay-causing bacteria,” says Dr. Edelstein. In fact, 80 percent of all cavities occur in just 25 percent of kids. The key role that bacteria plays in decay may also explain why some kids who eat tons of candy or never floss are lucky enough to avoid dental problems.

Emilie Mosby, of Kingman, Arizona, had lots of cavities when she was a kid, so she panicked when she saw a dark spot on her 3-year-old daughter’s tooth. “I took Teagan to the dentist, and when he told me she had a cavity, I almost cried,” says Mosby. “It’s so frustrating, I’ve always tried to take good care of her teeth, and I have a friend who doesn’t even brush her kids’ teeth every day and they’ve never gotten cavities.”

If you’ve had trouble with your teeth, you need to take responsibility for your child’s dental health—just like you’d be vigilant if you’ve had a family history of high cholesterol or skin cancer. Unfortunately, antibiotics can’t get rid of the cavity-causing bacteria in your child’s mouth. That’s why the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) actually urges pediatricians to ask parents about their own dental history by the time their baby is help keep decay away

Parents
STILLS: PETER ARDITO.

vises weaning your child from the bottle by 14 months to prevent allowing sugar to sit on the teeth for ten or 12 hours. The AAPD ad-

currence in children who drink milk or juice during the night—al-

early dental caries “baby-bottle tooth decay” because it often

D.M.D., chief of pediatric dentistry at Schneider Children’s Hos-

milk and formula, bathe the teeth in sugar, says Ronald Kosinski,

Think about drinks. Fruit juice (even diluted), as well as breast

mutans

Fruit juice (even diluted), as well as breast

and sugar off the teeth. Fluoride is an essential part of
dental health because it not only restores calcium to de-
caying teeth, but also limits the production of corrosive acid. Your child should see a dentist by his first birthday; ac-
cording to recommendations from the American Academy of
Pediatric Dentistry Association (AAPD) and the AAP. If
you wait until your child is older, decay can be well underway:
About 40 percent of 2- to 5-year-olds have cavities.

However, most parents don’t know they should make an
appointment for their baby. A recent study found that only 10
percent of 1-year-olds and 24 percent of 2-year-olds had ever
visited the dentist. “Not all pediatricians look out for a toddler’s
oral health, and some doctors don’t even look at the teeth,” says
Dr. Casamassimo. But it’s important to treat cavities in baby

tes. These first teeth serve as space holders for permanent
tooth, so losing one prematurely can cause alignment problems

Although you may worry that your little one will never sit still
and open her mouth, the first visit will be quick. The dentist can
easily spot the telltale plaque buildup along the gum line
that’s a sign of mutans (you can look for it too), and he can also
do a culture to measure bacteria levels (in you and your child).

Plaque Attack

Even though some kids are at much higher risk of developing
cavities, all children can get them. So it’s important for everyone
to follow this roadmap for dental health.

Tame a sweet tooth. Limiting sugar—which bacteria need in
order to survive—is the number-one way to prevent cavities. It’s
actually the frequency, not the total quantity of sugar consump-
tion, that matters most, says Dr. Edelstein. (Eating a chocolate
bar all at once is less harmful to the teeth than eating one bite
every hour.) That’s because repeatedly exposing the teeth to
sugar prevents saliva, the body’s natural tooth cleanser, from

Dr. Fresh

Float’n Fire Fly. This confetti-
filled brush blinks for a

Don’k Fun Flossers
with Fluoride. Individual
handheld flossers are
easier for you—and your
child—to use.

Orajel Toddler Training

Toothpaste. Seeing Thomas
on the tube of this fluoride-free
brand may make your child more
willing to open wide.

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