

MANY people think of good oral health as having white teeth and a nice smile, but there is so much more to it than that.

Unfortunately, many fail to see that poor oral health, even in childhood, can have far-reaching consequences.

For example, studies show that children who have cavities at a young age are three times more likely to have them as adults.

And the scary thing is that the Malaysian National Oral Health Survey of Preschool Children reports that 71.3% of five-year-olds already have cavities!

So what can parents do to prevent this from happening?

International Medical University consultant paediatric dentist Dr Yogeswari Sivapragasam offers some advice:

> Start them young

It is easy to overlook oral care in babies – after all, they won't have teeth until months later!

However, babies should still have their gums cleaned at least twice a day.

This helps to set the foundation for a lifetime of daily oral cleaning routines.

Besides that, you should also get advice from healthcare practitioners, such as a nurse advisor at community clinics or paediatricians, on how to care for your child's oral health from birth.

This includes what to do when their teeth first appear.

> Say no to salt and added sugar

As children – and their teeth – grow, exposure to new foods is natural as their diet expands in accordance with their changing nutritional needs.

However, it is important to introduce new foods gradually and mindfully.

Preventing cavities in children



It's important to establish a dental care routine for your children from the time they are babies so that they will carry the habit throughout their lives. — Filepic

Do delay the introduction of added salt and sugar into your child's diet, so that they do not develop a liking for these flavours early on in life.

A lifelong preference for sweet foods can lead to higher risk of dental problems, as well as chronic health conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

> Make dental visits fun and regular

It is quite common for adults to have an aversion to visiting the dentist, and this may have developed from your own negative experiences.

However, it is important that you put aside your personal fears and help create a positive experience for your child.

Children should receive their first dental check-up when they are one year old (remember this: "first birthday, first dental check-up").

Thereafter, a check-up is advisable once every six months.

As it is unlikely that they will have any dental problems at this young age, this will help young children have a positive experience, rather than associate dental visits with pain and fear.

Regular visits will help to normalise the experience of visiting a dentist and will go a long way towards preventive care.

The idea behind early dental visits is to detect any potential problems fast and prevent them from progressing further.

> Be alert to behavioural changes

Children may sometimes refuse certain foods or refuse to brush their teeth.

While this may be easily explained as the child being fussy or picky, there could be another reason behind it.

A child with cavities or gum disease may experience chronic discomfort or pain, causing them to avoid foods that require chewing.

This may inadvertently lead them to avoid whole foods such as apples and chicken, and choose softer foods instead.

One concern is that they may opt for processed foods that contain higher levels of salt, sugar and fat.

Over time, this may lead to nutritional deficiencies or chronic conditions that can affect their health into adulthood.

Long-term pain can also cause irritability or affect their ability to concentrate during lessons in preschool or kindergarten.

In addition, poor oral health can also affect a child's self-esteem if they are teased due to the appearance of their stained or rotten teeth.

This may cause them to avoid social activities or become withdrawn.

So, do be alert and check for possible dental problems if your child suddenly appears to be unwilling to chew or becomes irritable without any apparent cause.

> Adapt to your child's changing oral health needs

You can help to support your child's oral health through different

stages of development by being observant of any visible signs of disease, such as bleeding gums, ulcers or discolouration of the teeth.

Don't assume that milk teeth are not important as they will drop out anyway after a number of years.

Do remember that establishing a lifetime of healthy oral health habits begins in childhood.

Here are some tips for oral care at different ages:

- **Before baby's teeth develop:** Use a clean, damp cloth wrapped around a finger and gently wipe the gums in the morning and at night.

- **After the first teeth appear:** Use a baby-friendly toothbrush with a toothpaste that contains fluoride to gently brush the teeth and gums at least twice a day, as part of a routine.

- **Pre-school age:** At this age, children are able to hold a toothbrush, but will need you to manually guide them on how to brush their teeth thoroughly.

- **School-going age:** By this time, children should be able to brush their teeth independently, with your supervision.

Oral health and general health are interlinked.

Overall health literacy, a healthy diet and good personal hygiene, including good oral care habits, all contribute towards overall health and well-being.

It is therefore essential to establish good oral care habits from infancy, with daily hygiene and preventive care as part of everyday life.

This will make oral care a natural part of life, allowing you to gradually entrust your children to continue these healthy habits into adulthood and for the rest of their lives.