

# Your Dental Health

*The contents of this series of "Dental Health Talks" was originally prepared by the American Dental Association. They are made available for Tundra Times through the Public Health Education Office of the Alaska Native Health Service.*

*It is well known that our dental health program in Interior Alaska has not yet reached everyone needing dental services. This is especially true about the people in the rural communities. However, everyone understands how important it is to take care of our teeth which is a part of our total well-being.*

## No. 24—Teething

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There are two common misconceptions that often put parents on the wrong road to good dental health for their children: the first wrong idea is that primary or "baby teeth" don't have to be cared for because they will be replaced by permanent teeth, and the other is that babies are born completely toothless.

The newborn smiles — they usually reveal a whole mouthful of bare, pink gums. Yet under those gums are baby's first teeth which began development during pregnancy. Some of those unseen teeth are nearly complete at birth.

Occasionally, a baby will be born with a tooth showing, but most babies begin teething between the sixth and eighth month after birth. The informed parent can ease the baby through the teething process, which can take up to two years for primary teeth.

Most often, the baby's first teeth to push up through the gums by a process called "eruption" are the center two lower front teeth. Next are the upper two central teeth often called milk teeth, these early front teeth have tiny points on their edges. They may be staggered in position, so parents need not worry that the front teeth are coming in crooked.

Clinically, the eruption process usually follows this pattern for primary teeth: four front teeth or central incisors followed in several months by four lateral incisors adjacent to them; then a space is skipped and the four first molars erupt at around one year of age; at 16 to 18 months the four cuspids or eye teeth fill the skipped spaces; at 20 to 24 months the four second molars erupt. All primary teeth should be erupted by age 2½ to 3 years.

The first permanent teeth can erupt as early as five years of age but usually appear at about age 6. Hence, they are often called the "six-year molars."

Teething, a natural process, can afford varying degrees of discomfort to babies. It may be ac-

companied by swollen gums. The baby may also drool considerably and be sleepless and irritable. Any of these symptoms, however, may be associated with health problems other than natural teething.

The baby, at this stage, has a driving need to chew. Relief can be obtained through a safe chewing object — a hard cracker, cooled plastic teething ring or hard, non-toxic coated toy. The gums may be rubbed with a mild medication recommended by your dentist or the baby's pediatrician. The rubbing often relieves the soreness as much as the medication.

Each child has his own teething pattern which is influenced by heredity. Girls often begin teething slightly earlier than boys.

After five or six years of age, the primary teeth will begin to loosen and fall out, to be replaced by permanent teeth.

Once the child reaches this stage, all future dental care must be based on this simple premise; every tooth in the mouth is necessary.

Primary teeth are more important than most parents realize, if primary teeth are diseased, permanent teeth can be affected. Those primary teeth are also all a baby has for chewing his food, the first step in the digestive process and teeth play a role in phonics and, therefore, good speech.

Even parents of the few babies born with teeth should hesitate to have a tooth removed (unless it is loose and could fall out and choke the infant) simply because the tooth cuts into the baby's tongue or mother's nipple when feeding. The missing tooth would create a space that adjacent teeth would try to fill.

Any primary tooth that is lost prematurely due to accident, disease or decay should be replaced by a space maintainer. Likewise, lost permanent teeth should be replaced by a bridge or other appropriate dental work.

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(Next article: "First Visit to the Dentist")