

HOW YOU'RE WRECKING YOUR KIDS' MILK TEETH (AND WHY THEY DO MATTER)

Even if you have the best healthy intentions for your children, you could unwittingly be putting their delicate baby teeth at risk. We talk to some of the UK's top experts about some of the more surprising causes of decay...

DAILY JUICE

How virtuous we think we are, passing up fizzy pop for fruit juice, which does count as one of their five-a-day. But Judy More, a paediatric dietitian, says, 'Fruit juice has a huge sugar content and contains acid, so is very cavity-forming. Children are better off eating a piece of fruit and drinking water. If they do have it, dilute one part juice to 10 parts water.' And smoothies can be worse for teeth, says Dr Nigel Carter, chief executive of the British Dental Health Foundation. 'Not only do the sugar and acid attack the teeth, but the banana in it makes the smoothie stick to them.' Ideally, only have them with meals.



BEDTIME BOTTLES

Sometimes getting kids to sleep is such a battle you'll do anything to help them drop off. But if that includes giving them a bottle of milk, you could regret it. 'I hate sending a child to have their teeth extracted because of bottle cavities,' says Uchenna Okoye of the London Smiling dental practice. Judy adds, 'Up until 12 months, bottles of milk are an important part of your baby's diet, but after that, phase them out, and give smaller amounts (3-4oz) in a cup.' Night-time is when the mouth is the most vulnerable, as you have less saliva. So after a child has brushed their teeth, only give them water, but put it in a bottle if it helps them to relax before bed.



RAISIN HELL

Parents are constantly being clouted with advice on getting their kids to eat more fruit and veg, but even that's a minefield. 'Raisins are thought of as a healthy snack, but the process of drying grapes concentrates the sugar content,' says Nigel. 'Plus, they stick on to teeth, so the sugar is there for longer. Other dried fruit, such as apricots, are possibly not as sticky, but still have a high sugar content.' And the frequency of snacking is key. 'It takes the mouth about an hour to recover from an attack,' says Uchenna. 'So if you're having a sweet drink, a packet of raisins or a packet of sweets, have it in one go as opposed to eating it slowly over an hour or so.'



FIZZY WHIZZY

'People don't realise the perils of fizzy water, which contains carbonic acid,' says Dr Joe Oliver of the Welbeck Clinic. 'It's obviously not as bad as cola, but it still has an effect if you drink a lot. If you're diluting drinks for kids, use still water.' We bet you think the US has a bigger problem with fizzy drink erosion than us. Wrong. '50% of children in the UK and US have dental erosion, even though people think the US consumes more fizzy drinks,' says Andrew Eder of the London Toothwear Centre. 'Probably because Americans drink them with ice, which dilutes them. Plus, they more often use a straw, so the drink is in less direct contact with the teeth.'



MEDICINE MAYHEM

Obviously nothing's going to stop you giving your kids the medication they need, but do be cautious about the type you pick. 'A lot of medicines are sugary to make them taste nice,' says Andrew. 'A short course of antibiotics over a week or so is not going to be a problem for most children. But for those on long-term medication, having a spoonful three or four times a day could be an issue. Most medicine does come in a sugar-free version, just ask your GP or pharmacist.' Although they're not as easy to take, of course!



BRUSHING TIPS

When to begin: Teeth need looking after as soon as they start appearing, says Uchenna. 'When they're really little, use a flannel to rub the surface. As they get bigger, use a toothbrush. A lot of parents brush their child's teeth standing in front of them, but then they move their head back, so you're chasing them, which can be traumatic. Do it from behind them instead, then you can hold them, support their head, and really "attack", so it's over quickly.'

When to brush: Don't brush teeth straight after eating. Uchenna explains, 'Parents give their kids sweets then tell them to brush their teeth. It's the worst thing you can do. Sweets and fizzy drinks soften the tooth enamel, so if children then go and brush, they're almost brushing the enamel away, leaving teeth more vulnerable.' Brush twice a day, before eating in the morning, and before bed - about an hour after the last meal or drink of the day.

What to brush with: Use a child's toothbrush (small enough to get to the back teeth) and a fluoride toothpaste. Yes, fluoride is essential, according to Nigel. 'It first came into UK toothpastes in the early 70s and was responsible for reducing decay levels by 30-40%. It's hugely protective.' Children under three need a smear of toothpaste containing fluoride. After that, a pea-sized amount will do.

WHY ALL THE FUSS OVER BABY TEETH?

Hang on - we're talking about baby teeth. The ones that fall out and get replaced. So is there any long-term harm in kids losing their milk teeth to decay? According to our dentists, yes. Here are five reasons why it's vital to keep baby teeth in top condition

1 The ouch factor

Bad teeth hurt and need to be treated. 'If the teeth decay or erode, they can be painful and there's a chance they can become abscessed,' says Andrew. 'It can be nasty, requiring antibiotics or time off school. Having teeth taken out can be traumatic for children - lots of dental treatments mean a local anaesthetic, or even a general anaesthetic if you're taking out multiple teeth.'

2 The smile factor

Sending your child off to school with toothy gaps and rot can have a huge impact on confidence, because every time they smile, people notice. 'This issue is huge,' says Uchenna. 'Children in primary school can be incredibly cruel. Affected children often cover their mouths with embarrassment as they talk.'

3 The brace factor

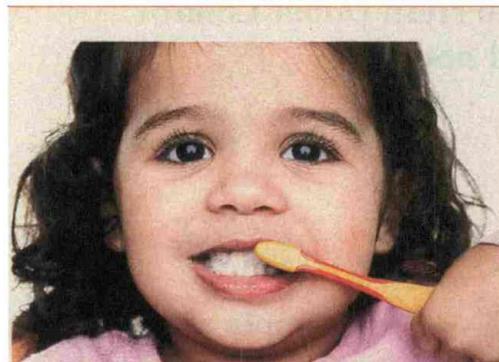
Milk teeth do have a long-term purpose. 'First teeth maintain space in the jaw for the second teeth to come through,' says Nigel. 'If you get early loss of the first teeth and there's not enough room in the jaw for the second to come through, you could need expensive orthodontic treatment later on.'

4 The fear factor

Not many of us look forward to a dentist appointment, but miserable experiences early on exacerbate the problem. 'If the child associates the dentist with pain, they're more likely to become phobic and carry that fear through to adulthood,' says Joe.

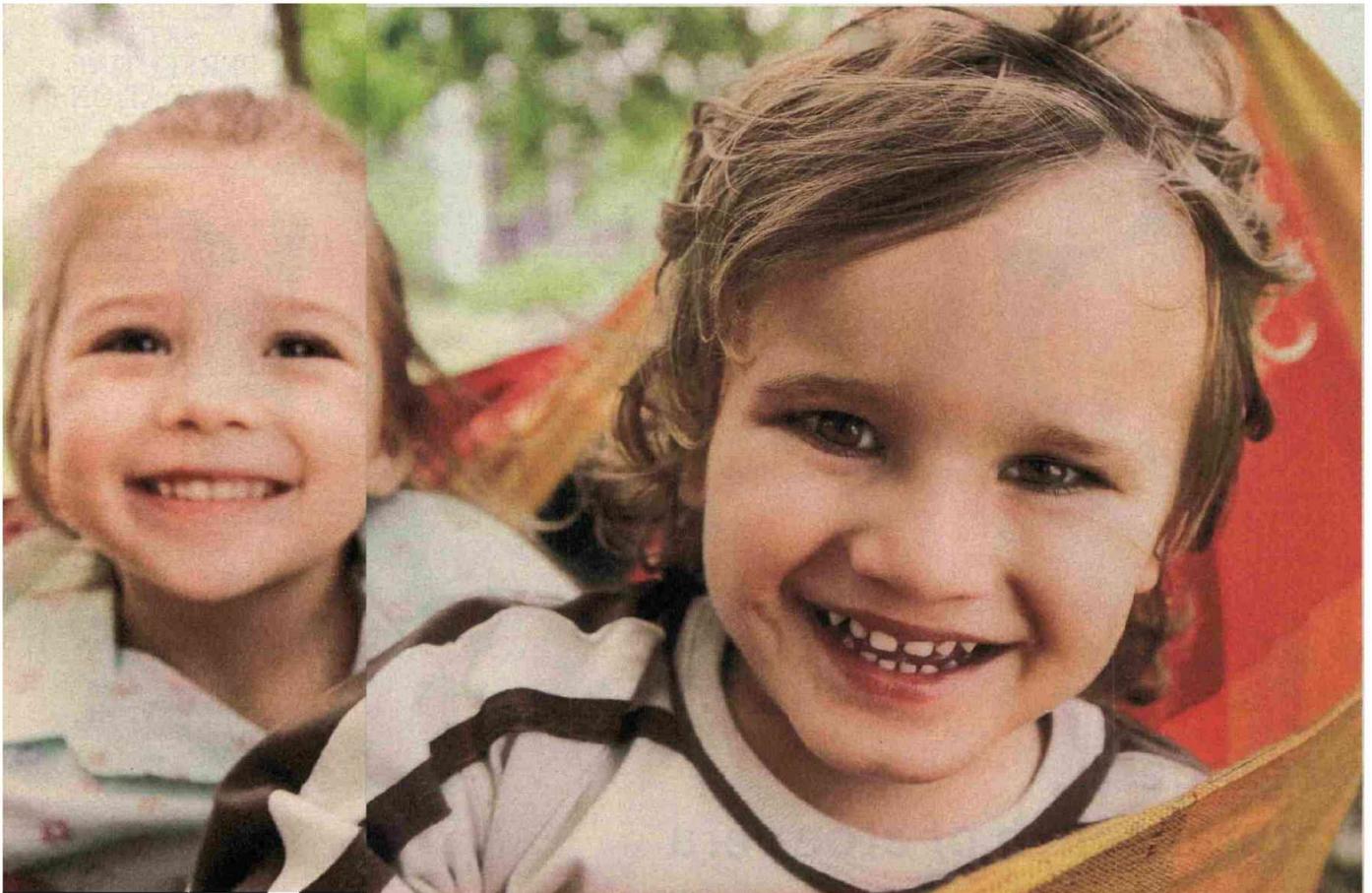
5 ... and bad habits run deep

Looking after your milk teeth well establishes patterns for life. Forming good habits at an early age leads to better oral hygiene later.



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