

Look, Ma, Cavities!

Preschoolers are at growing risk of tooth decay

By Sarah Baldauf

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Decay in baby teeth is on the rise-and, no, it's not OK even though they'll fall out. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 28 percent of preschoolers were getting cavities between 1999 and 2004, up from 24 percent between 1988 and 1994.



Why should parents be concerned? The baby teeth maintain space for the permanent teeth, and premature loss almost certainly means braces. And bad dental hygiene now bodes ill for the future. "The biggest thing is diet," says Fred Margolis, a pediatric dentist and clinical instructor of dentistry at Loyola University in Chicago. Fruit-flavored snacks and juices, for example, can be very high in sugar, and many tots drink soda, too. But bottled water, which often lacks the protective fluoride in tap water, could be contributing to the trouble. Some manufacturers offer fluoridated versions; experts suggest looking for about 1 part per million.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry says children should see a dentist as soon as the first tooth erupts. Sleeping with a bottle is a no-no. Non-fluoridated children's toothpaste should be used until kids can spit properly, since excess fluoridation can result in stained permanent teeth. Fluoride varnish, polished on by a dentist, can also be beneficial to kids at moderate or high risk for cavities, the American Dental Association says. And if a willful toddler wants to wield the brush, Mom or Dad should get in there first.