



## NEWS RELEASE

### ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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## Start good oral hygiene and nutrition practices early

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Dental screenings of Alabama school children in 2003 found that many children either have one or more cavities that need a filling, or that they already have at least one filling which means they had cavities at an earlier age. In the statewide survey, 61 percent of third grade students screened either have a cavity now or have had a cavity in the past. This is similar to national statistics and points out the need for preventive actions to increase the number of children who never get a cavity.

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, a time to remind parents that a cavity may occur in children as young as age 1, long before he or she starts to school. And while tooth decay can be damaging at any age, it can be particularly so among the young, preschool child.

"Good nutritional and oral hygiene practices, starting at an early age, are important to keep your child's teeth healthy and to ensure a healthy smile that will last a lifetime," says Dr. Stuart A. Lockwood, State Dental Director, Alabama Department of Public Health. He conducted the dental screenings in collaboration with the University of Alabama School of Dentistry.

"Baby teeth are important to help young children chew food, talk clearly, and save space for the permanent teeth when they erupt in the mouth," Lockwood stated. "At any age, however, tooth decay is preventable whenever appropriate strategies are begun and followed."

Listed here are 10 strategies parents can follow for a lifetime of healthy smiles:

1. While pregnant, have a dentist check the expectant mother's teeth for cavities. Cavities that the mother has could cause cavities for the baby later.
2. Clean your baby's gums and early teeth with a clean, damp cloth every day. Switch to a small soft toothbrush as more teeth come in.
3. Give only formula, water or breast milk in a bottle, and put nothing sweet on a pacifier.
4. Never let your baby sleep with a bottle in the mouth, or breast feed at will during the night.
5. Wait until 6 months of age to offer juice - and then from a cup, never a bottle.
6. Trade the bottle for a cup by the first birthday.
7. Give your child healthy snacks like fruits and vegetables -- limit sugary juices and soft drinks.

8. Start regular checkups for your baby at age 1. Learn if your child may be likely to develop cavities in the future and what measures you and your dentist can take to prevent them.

9. Brush your child's teeth twice each day, using only a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste until your child has the skill to handle the toothbrush alone, usually around age 4 or 5.

10. Take your child to your dentist for placement of dental sealants soon after the 6-year permanent molars appear, and later when the 12-year molars erupt.

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