

Guide to teething and brushing



- ◆ When do teeth first appear?
- ◆ At what age should tooth brushing start?
- ◆ How do I choose an appropriate toothbrush?
- ◆ How should I care for my toothbrush?

When do teeth appear?

The first tooth appears at about 6 months of age, and a child will have all 20 primary teeth by about age 3 years. During teething, babies may become restless, lose their appetite, or drool more, and gums may develop harmless eruption cysts through which the teeth erupt. However, if a child develops a fever or diarrhoea, or is over-restless, visit your doctor. To soothe a teething child, try:

- Gently rubbing the gum with a clean finger, cool teaspoon, or wet gauze pad
- Using a clean teething ring or dummy/pacifier, but never dip these in honey, fruit juice, or syrup
- Asking your doctor or dentist for special ointment

Primary teeth start to shed and give way to adult teeth at about age 6 years. There are up to 32 adult teeth, and most appear by about age 14; the third molars (wisdom teeth) appear last [see Box].

When should brushing start?

When a baby's teeth erupt, they can be brushed with a soft baby-toothbrush and a bit of water. Regular dental check-ups should begin by the age of 1 year.

Only from age 2 years onwards should fluoride toothpaste be used, and only a pea-sized amount, with adult supervision until age 6 years to encourage spitting out. Floss between all teeth once a day (see <www.toothclub.gov.hk> for suggested brushing and flossing technique). Don't forget to wash your hands before and after brushing/flossing, and be green as you clean: don't keep the water running unnecessarily.

How to choose a brush?

- All conventional brush/bristle/handle designs, as well as electric toothbrushes (see your dentist before use), are effective at cleaning teeth
- Use soft bristles to avoid gum/tooth damage
- Use a brush head of an appropriate size:
 - 0-2 years: size of a HK10¢ coin (about 15 mm)
 - 2-6 years: size of a HK20¢ coin (about 19 mm)
 - 6-12 years: size of a HK50¢ coin (about 22 mm)
 - 12+ years: size of a HK\$1 coin (about 25 mm)

Caring for your toothbrush?

- Rinse your toothbrush well after use, to remove saliva, plaque, and particles of food and toothpaste
- Shake off excess water and store your toothbrush upright in the open air to let the bristles dry
- Avoid cross-contamination by not letting brushes touch and not sharing toothbrushes; some research has shown that toilet flushing spreads germs, so closing the lid before flushing, keeping your toothbrush far from the toilet, and rinsing the brush in an antibacterial mouthwash might help keep it clean
- Change your toothbrush regularly (eg each season), or if bristles are frayed or if you have been ill

Sources: Hong Kong Childhealth Foundation, <www.childhealthhongkong.com>; American Dental Association, <www.ada.org>; and Hong Kong Government Toothclub, <www.toothclub.gov.hk>.

Written by Trevor Lane, DPhil; edited by Cordelia Chan, BSc, RDH, and Cynthia Yiu, PhD, FHKAM (Dent Surg). This Patient Page is for general informational use and is not a substitute for diagnosis; for specific advice, please consult a dentist.



Tooth eruption times

The diagrams below show the arrangement and typical ages at eruption of teeth for (1) children (=deciduous/primary dentition, or milk/baby teeth) and (2) adults (=permanent/secondary dentition):

KEY: Tooth name [age at eruption of lower/upper tooth]

