

Mind and Body Page

Mother's Matters # 3 /Anne Schaerer-Batterjee

Q. Is there any relationship between breastfeeding and dental decay? I am worried about my baby's teeth.

A. Severe dental decay which occurs in very young children is referred to as "Baby Bottle Tooth Decay", implying a strong link with artificial feeding practices.

Breastfed children can and do have caries, but at a greatly reduced rate compared with children who are bottle fed from birth. The fact that some breastfed children do have problems with decay probably has to do more with inherited weaknesses in the enamel and general care of the teeth.

Before the use of baby bottles, decay on baby teeth was rare. Dr. Brian Palmer and Dr. Harold Torney, two dentists, found in studying skulls from 500 to 1000 years old that the decay rate was less than 0.2 percent. Dr. Palmer concluded from his lengthy and extensive research that breastfeeding does not cause tooth decay. Decay has only become common as more and more refined starches and sugars have entered our diets.

Q. How does bottle feeding make teeth prone to decay?

A. There is a difference between the way children feed from a bottle and from the breast. First, the position of the nipple is entirely different. The human nipple is drawn far back into the child's mouth, well beyond the front teeth. The bottom teeth are covered by the child's tongue during suckling. The bottle nipple is much closer to the child's front teeth.

Liquid pools continually from the artificial nipple, little or no sucking is required. This liquid leaves a constant coating over the teeth. This coating is the perfect place to attract the bacteria that cause decay. In contrast, milk will stop coming out of the human nipple when the baby ceases to suck. Thus breastfeeding discourages the pooling of bacterial food sources whereas bottle feeding encourages it.

Human milk itself is protective against dental decay. The enzymes found in breastmilk reduce the bacteria found in the mouth. Immune properties of breastmilk inhibit the bacteria that cause cavities. The pH of breastmilk is not conducive to bacterial growth.

A study in Sweden (1997) concluded that “Children who still breastfed at one year of age, remained free of cavities until the age of three as long as they were taught how to brush and care for their teeth.” Researchers from the University of Athens surveyed children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. Children that were breastfed for more than 40 days were less likely to develop cavities than those who were breastfed for a shorter time.

As the breastfeeding baby grows in to a toddler and continues to nurse, the maxilla develops into a wide arc because of the tongue and nipple pressure applied on the palate. This helps in giving the erupting new teeth plenty of space to grow into eliminating the possibility of overcrowding and the need for braces later in life.