



Heartline

Children with heart conditions

families



Dental Care

For Children With
Heart Conditions

Protecting Your Child

Tooth decay is painful, and can damage your child's health: – gum disease, throat infections, earache – these can often be traced back to bad teeth. Infection in the mouth could be a cause of endocarditis, a disease of the heart, which can be fatal.

Endocarditis is rare, but children with heart defects are particularly vulnerable, so it is especially important that you protect your child from tooth decay, abscesses and gum disease.

We hope that this booklet will help you.

Endocarditis

If your child has a heart problem, an increase in bacteria getting into the blood stream could cause an infection of the heart called endocarditis. Although rare, the risk of endocarditis can be increased due to roughened linings in the heart and sluggish blood flow.

A small amount of bacteria enters our bloodstream all the time, and it is destroyed by our immune system. But if the conditions in your child's mouth, such as a tooth abscess, allow a large number of bacteria to breed and to get into the blood stream, the immune system may lose the battle to stop them settling on the lining of the heart and valves. Gum disease is primarily a problem in adults, but good dental hygiene begins when the children are young.

What causes the bacteria to get into the blood stream?

We know that bacteria live in plaque – a soft sticky film that forms on the teeth and gums every day. Sugar from food helps bacteria to breed and to produce acids. These acids can attack the gums, causing gum disease.

Although tooth enamel is the hardest substance in our body, the acids can wear it away causing tooth decay.

When the gums are soft, inflamed and bleeding, bacteria can move more easily into the blood stream. This allows more and more bacteria to breed in the soft centre of the tooth when the enamel is no longer defending it.

So what is the best way to stop this from happening?

You need to stop bacteria from attacking your child's mouth - with the added bonus of no painful toothache, fewer sore throats and earaches and a good looking smile!

- **Your child's diet:** you need to limit the amount of sugar that gets into your child's mouth, and the length of time it stays there. Sugar is found in a lot of prepared food and drinks – not just sweets and biscuits. **Avoid them whenever you can.**

After your child has sweet food or drink give plain water to rinse his or her mouth. Smaller children can swallow the water, larger children can spit it out. At the same time your child's diet should include the calcium that will help build up the strength of the enamel on their second teeth – found in milk, cheese and meat.

Raw vegetables act as natural cleaners, and strengthen teeth as they are chewed, but remember that most fruit and even natural fruit drinks have sugar and acid.

- **Cleaning:** Get rid of the plaque in your child's mouth. Clean teeth after meals. Small children who can't or won't have their teeth cleaned can chew on a soft rag, and rinse with clean water. However good your child may be with a toothbrush, clean his or her teeth yourself as well, until disclosing tablets (from your local pharmacist) show your child can do a thorough job.
- **Dentist: Remember to keep the dentist updated** – after your child has surgery, for example, and if your child's medicines are changed. Knowing that your child is on an anticoagulant – warfarin or aspirin – is particularly important for dental care. If you suspect your child has a problem in his or her mouth get your dentist's advice as soon as possible.

What about fluoride?

Teeth are made up of three layers. The hard outer layer, enamel, begins to form during pregnancy. Fluoride in the diet of a growing child becomes part of the tooth structure and strengthens the enamel.

All water contains some fluoride, but in most areas of the UK the water supply does not contain enough. If you are not sure of the fluoride content of your water supply, ask your dentist. Don't give your child fluoride or fluoride toothpaste until you have spoken to the dentist.

How to keep sugar away?

We all know it is not a simple matter to keep sugary foods away from children. Pass a copy of this leaflet to your child minder, relatives, grandparents – any adults involved in your child's care.

- If you do give sweets to your child, try to limit them as occasional end of meal treats.
- If you do give your young child sweet drinks, don't use a bottle, as the teat is held in the mouth for longer and it is able to coat teeth with sugar.
- Never dip a dummy in sugary food like honey or jam.
- Reinforce information about how bad sweet fizzy drinks are for your older child by getting leaflets from the dentist and asking the cardiac liaison nurse to speak to him or her at the next appointment.

My child needs high calorie foods

Butter, cream and yoghurt are better at increasing your child's weight than sugary foods, but in the real world there are children who will only eat half a chocolate button a day. Calories come first, so redouble your efforts to keep your child's mouth clean.

My child will only take sweet medicines

Ask the paediatric pharmacist at the hospital about getting sugar-free medicines. Use oral syringes rather than teaspoons, as these allow the child to shoot the medicine beyond the part of the tongue that can taste how

horrible it is, and away from the teeth. Swap to pills or tablets as soon as your child is old enough to swallow them.

I can't find a dentist

- Telephone NHS 111 for England, NHS , 0845 4647 Wales or NHS inform Helpline on 0800 22 44 88 for Scotland. If you have the internet, you can find local NHS dentists by putting in your postcode at nhsdentistlocator.co.uk
- Check that they are offering NHS services and that they can offer the services you may need for your child.

My child has acid reflux

Your dentist needs to know if your child has reflux into the mouth as the acid makes the teeth even more vulnerable.

Warfarin makes my child's gums bleed

If your child's gums bleed and he or she is on warfarin, ask for an INR test to check that their level of dose is right, and get a dental appointment.

You may be using a toothbrush that is too hard, or the child may be using an electric toothbrush too enthusiastically.

Anyway, you need to know that the gums are healthy.

My child's teeth had poor enamel when they came through

There are many conditions where the child's first or second teeth are poorly formed. You may be told that this is likely.

Ask to be referred to the children's hospital from your cardiologist or dentist for early advice and treatment where necessary.

There may be some input if your child is being seen for late language development, as we use teeth to make the sounds for words.

Antibiotics before dental treatment

Until 2008 it was thought that antibiotics given before dental treatment could protect against endocarditis. You may have been told that your child should have antibiotics, and you may have been given a card to warn your dentist about it.

There is no evidence to show that this is effective, and the practice of dentists administering those very strong antibiotics before treatment (prophylactically) has been discouraged.

Ask your child's cardiologist if and when your child may need to take preventative measures.

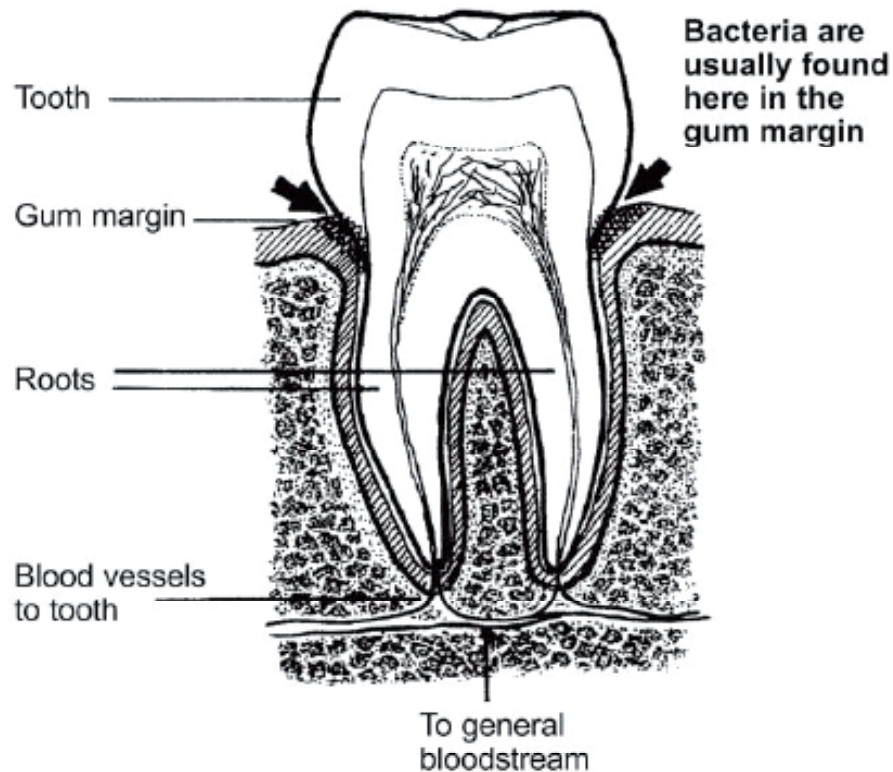


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Keeping in touch

You can join Heartline using the form on our website:
www.heartline.org.uk.

Our Families are entitled to a free copy of *Heart Children: A practical handbook for parents of children with a heart condition*, a free wetsuit to keep a heart child comfortable in water, access to the Forum, discounted caravan park holidays, and short PGL activity breaks for older children.

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