teething time

Keep your child happy while he's busy growing his grin.

by JEANNETTE MONINGER

Got a drooly, cranky little guy? He could be getting ready to pop a tooth. The first signs of teething typically appear around 4 months, when your infant's saliva production kicks into overdrive and he starts to mouth everything within reach. Still, it could be a couple of months—or more—before you see a glimmer of white. The two bottom front teeth usually emerge around 6 months, followed four to eight weeks later by the two top front teeth. After that, your baby should get one or two new teeth each month until he has all 20 primary (or baby) teeth, around age 3. This expert advice will help you handle his sore gums.

mouth watch

Despite what you may have heard, teething doesn't cause high fever or diarrhea. Since your baby is putting everything in her mouth in an effort to massage her gums, it's easy for her to pick up germs, says Steven Chussid, D.D.S., director of pediatric dentistry at Columbia University College of Dental Medicine, in New York City. If your baby seems sick during this stage, call your pediatrician. While teeth are erupting, her gums may look swollen or, occasionally, she may develop a bluish-red bump called an eruption hematoma. "The area might look bruised, but it's generally not painful," says Joel Berg, D.D.S., president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

soothing strategies

The last part of a tooth's slow journey upward is typically the toughest. "When it begins to break through, it puts pressure on the gums, which can be uncomfortable," says Dr. Berg. (Fortunately, your baby will probably be less bothered by this as he gets older.) To provide relief, wet a clean washcloth, wring out the excess water, and put it in the refrigerator or freezer to chill. Rubber teethers also work well, but keep in mind that some liquid-filled teethers can get too hard in the freezer and bruise a baby's already sensitive mouth (they usually indicate this with "do not freeze" on the package). Your baby may also like for you to massage his gums with your (clean) finger or a moist gauze pad, says Dr. Berg.

You'll probably be able to make your baby feel better without medication, but if he seems particularly fussy, try offering him a dose of acetaminophen, or ibuprofen if he's at least 6 months.

healthy habits

A small number of babies don't get their first teeth until after they turn 1. This usually isn't cause for concern, but still make an appointment with a pediatric dentist to make sure there isn't a problem. In fact, all babies should see a dentist by 12 months. "Dental exams are just as important to your child's health as a well-care visit to the pediatrician," says Dr. Chussid.

"You'll discuss teething, and learn what to expect in the coming months." Your dentist should also go over how pacifiers, thumb-sucking, and bottles can affect your baby's teeth, as well as proper cleaning methods and the use of fluoride toothpaste—all important for maintaining a healthy mouth well after the last molar comes in.

got more!

Not sure how to brush those tiny teeth and gums? Go to parents.com/brush-teeth to watch a video with cleaning tips.