

Generations of healthy smiles

The connection between family, genetics and oral health: What you should know

Have you ever seen a family full of healthy smiles? It may not be a coincidence. Here are some surprising facts about the impact family and genetics can have on your oral health.

Fact #1: Genes play a role in your risk of dental diseases*

Do you have a family history of chronic health conditions, such as heart disease, obesity or diabetes? If so, you may also be at an increased risk of dental diseases, such as tooth decay and gum disease. That's because there's a proven connection between chronic health conditions and oral health issues.

What that means for you

Even if you are at an increased risk of dental diseases based on your family history, that doesn't mean your oral health is completely out of your control. It just means you have to be a little extra diligent.

Here are three simple things you can do to help reduce your risk of dental diseases:

- Practice good oral health habits.
- Know your family history.
- Be open and honest with your dentist about your family history.

Fact #2: Cavities are contagious**

Yes, you read that right. Cavities, or more specifically, the bacteria that causes them, are contagious. Cavities and tooth decay are the same thing: The bacteria that causes them are infectious. This means they can be spread from one person to another, which is especially easy to do among a family.

* National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. (2019, August). "Genes Are Key to Oral Health & Beyond." <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/news-events/nidcr-news/2019/genes-are-key-oral-health-beyond>

** American Dental Association. "5 Ways to Prevent Kids' Tooth Decay." Mouth Healthy. https://www.mouthhealthy.org/~media/MouthHealthy/Files/Infographics/ADA_MH_5ways.pdf?la=en

What that means for parents and caretakers

Helping children maintain their oral health not only involves teaching them good oral health habits but it also involves maintaining your own oral health too.

After all, a child's teeth are susceptible to cavities as soon as they begin to break through the gums. So if you've ever cleaned off a dropped pacifier by sticking it in your own mouth or tested the temperature of your baby's food using their spoon, you could be passing on cavity-causing bacteria without knowing it.

Don't worry. There are simple things you can do to help protect your children from cavities.

- Stop giving your baby a bottle by the time they are 12 months of age.
- Practice good oral health habits yourself.
- Don't put your baby to bed or nap with a bottle containing anything except water.
- Limit nighttime feedings (breast or bottle) after eruption of a child's first tooth.
- Encourage drinking from a cup by age one.
- Offer water, and limit juice by age one.
- Provide a balanced diet by age one.
- Brush your child's teeth twice a day by age one.
- Take your child to the dentist by age one and as often as your dentist recommends.

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Bonus fact:

Certain genes have even been connected to tooth and saliva quality.*



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