HEALTH BASICS

Teething

Teething is the natural process of a baby's first teeth emerging through the gums.

WHAT IT IS
the natural emergence of a baby's first teeth

WHERE IT COMES UP
infancy as teeth move through the gums

WHY IT MATTERS
can cause brief gum discomfort and affect soothing

WHAT IT IS NOT
not a disease or explanation for significant illness

WHO TO ASK
pediatric clinician or pediatric dentist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
mouth examination when needed

Overview

Teething is the normal process in which a baby's first teeth move through the gums and become visible. These first teeth are called primary teeth, baby teeth, or milk teeth.

The first tooth often appears at around 6 months, but the timing differs widely. Some babies get a tooth earlier, while others have no visible teeth until later in their first year. This range is usually normal. Most children have all 20 primary teeth by about age 3.

The lower front teeth commonly appear first, followed by the upper front teeth. Teeth farther back usually emerge later. The order is not identical for every child.

Teething is not a disease. It can cause temporary gum discomfort, but it should not be used to explain a baby who appears significantly unwell.

How it works

A baby's primary teeth begin developing before birth. They remain below the gums while the roots and surrounding tissues develop.

As a tooth moves upward, the gum over it gradually becomes thinner and remodels. The tooth

then becomes visible in the mouth. It does not need to "cut" through the gum in the way that phrase may suggest.

You may notice swollen or tender-looking gum over an emerging tooth. A baby may drool more, chew on objects, rub their gums, or be harder to settle. Sleep and feeding may be briefly disrupted. Some babies show very little change.

Drooling often increases during the same stage of development, whether or not a tooth is about to appear. Saliva on the face can irritate the skin around the mouth or chin, but this is a skin reaction rather than a problem with the tooth.

Occasionally, a small blue, purple, or clear swelling forms over an emerging tooth. This is called an eruption cyst or eruption hematoma. It usually opens or settles as the tooth appears, but a dentist can check it if it is large, painful, bleeding repeatedly, or not improving.

Why it matters for your health

Recognizing normal teething can help you soothe your baby without using products that may cause harm. It also helps you avoid assuming that every change in behavior is related to teeth.

Primary teeth help a child chew, speak, and maintain space for adult teeth. Dental care should therefore begin when the first tooth appears.

Teething often happens during a period when babies explore objects with their mouths. Anything offered for chewing needs to be too large to swallow, free from detachable parts, and used with supervision.

Teething can overlap with infections and other childhood conditions. A baby who has a fever, repeated vomiting, significant diarrhea, breathing difficulty, unusual sleepiness, or poor fluid intake needs assessment based on those concerns. Teething does not rule out another cause.

What can go wrong

The most common concern is mistaking an illness for teething . A true fever or a baby who seems generally unwell should not automatically be attributed to teeth. Colds, ear infections, stomach infections, and other conditions can occur at the same age.

Dehydration can develop when a baby drinks much less than usual or loses fluid through repeated vomiting or diarrhea. Warning signs include fewer wet diapers, a dry mouth, no tears when crying, or unusual drowsiness.

Some teething products create avoidable risks:

Homeopathic teething tablets and gels are not proven to help and may contain unreliable amounts of active ingredients. Amber necklaces do not release a proven pain-relieving substance through the skin.

Seek emergency help if your baby is choking, struggling to breathe, turns blue or gray, has a seizure, becomes very difficult to wake, or develops another severe or rapidly worsening problem.

Seek urgent medical advice for a fever in a young infant, signs of dehydration, repeated vomiting, significant diarrhea, poor feeding, or behavior that is very different from usual. Follow local advice about fever in babies younger than 3 months.

A tooth that looks unusual, has been injured, or has not appeared when expected can usually be discussed at a routine dental or child health visit. Differences in timing are often harmless, but a clinician can consider growth, family patterns, and whether other teeth are developing normally.

- Choking or strangulation can occur with teething necklaces, bracelets, beads, or other jewelry
- Cold injury can result from applying frozen objects directly to the gums
- Methemoglobinemia , a dangerous reduction in the blood's ability to carry oxygen, has been linked to oral benzocaine products
- Local anesthetic toxicity can occur if numbing medicines such as lidocaine are swallowed or used incorrectly
- Poisoning or dosing errors can happen when pain medicines are given too often or in the wrong amount
- Mouth injury can result from sharp, breakable, or small objects

What you can do

If your baby is comfortable, nothing needs to be done to make the tooth appear. Teething cannot be sped up, and the gum does not need to be cut or opened.

For mild discomfort, you can:

Do not freeze teething rings unless their instructions specifically allow it. A frozen ring can become very hard and may injure the gum. Check teethers regularly for cracks, leaking fluid, or loose pieces.

If discomfort is interfering with feeding or sleep, ask a pharmacist or pediatric clinician whether an age-appropriate pain medicine is suitable. Use only the dose on the product label or

the dose given by a clinician for your child's current weight. Do not apply aspirin to the gums.

Avoid benzocaine teething gels, lidocaine preparations, teething jewelry, and unverified homeopathic products. Do not give a baby food that is hard, round, or likely to break into choking-sized pieces.

Once the first tooth appears, brush it twice a day with a small, soft toothbrush and a tiny smear of fluoride toothpaste. Check local dental guidance about the recommended fluoride strength. Arrange routine dental care by the child's first birthday, or sooner if you notice a tooth or gum concern.

A photograph and a brief record of when teeth appear can be useful if you want to discuss unusual timing or tooth development with a dentist. No blood test or scan is normally needed for teething.

- Gently massage the gum with a clean finger
- Offer a firm teething ring chilled in the refrigerator
- Let your baby chew a clean, cool, damp washcloth under supervision
- Wipe drool gently and use a simple barrier ointment if the chin becomes irritated
- Offer usual feeds and extra comfort

Common questions

Does teething cause fever or diarrhea?

Teething may happen alongside small changes in temperature or looser stools, but a true fever, repeated diarrhea, or a baby who seems unwell should not be assumed to be teething. Consider another cause and seek advice when appropriate.

How long does discomfort last?

Discomfort may come and go around the time each tooth emerges. There is no fixed schedule, and some babies have little noticeable discomfort. Ongoing distress deserves assessment rather than being repeatedly attributed to teething.

Is late teething a problem?

Not necessarily. Tooth timing differs among children and can run in families. Mention it during routine care if no teeth have appeared by the child's first birthday, or earlier if there are concerns about growth or development.

Are teething biscuits safe?

Some dissolve quickly, while others can break into pieces or contain added sugar. Check the

texture, ingredients, and age guidance. Always supervise eating, and avoid products that can form hard choking-sized pieces.

Should a blister over a tooth be popped?

No. Do not cut, puncture, or drain the gum at home. An eruption cyst usually settles as the tooth appears. A dentist should assess persistent, painful, or repeatedly bleeding swelling.

Can teething gels be used?

Numbing gels are generally not a good first choice. They may wash away quickly, be swallowed, or cause serious adverse effects. Ask a pharmacist or pediatric clinician before putting any medicine on a baby's gums.

Sources

- American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org - Teething Pain , updated guidance for parents
- American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry - Perinatal and Infant Oral Health Care , oral health policy and recommendations
- NHS - Baby teething symptoms , reviewed parental guidance
- US Food and Drug Administration - Benzocaine oral products and methemoglobinemia , drug safety communication
- US Food and Drug Administration - Teething necklaces, bracelets, and other jewelry , safety communication