



# Share and Share Alike?

## Not When It Comes to Cavity-causing Bacteria

As a parent, there are things you want to pass on to your child: maybe something big, like your house; maybe something sentimental, like your family heirlooms; and maybe something intangible, like your sense of humor. But you certainly don't want to pass on your cavities. If you have an infant or toddler, you may have taken particular notice of a recent study from Sweden touting the immunological benefits of parents using their own saliva to clean an infant's pacifier. The study, published in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, claims that infants whose parents clean pacifiers by licking or sucking on them may be less likely to develop allergies than children whose parents rinse or boil the pacifiers. But the American Dental Association (ADA) warns that the study does not take into account that this practice increases a baby's risk of developing cavities because adult saliva may also contain the bacteria that cause tooth decay.

Dental cavities are caused by a form of bacteria, *Streptococcus mutans*, which is contagious and can spread from adult to child through contact, since babies are born without bacteria. Any minute particle of saliva can transmit the bacteria from mouth to mouth. Even activities such as kissing, sharing utensils, or just talking too closely can create a vector for transmission, according to the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS). Licking a pacifier, as promoted in the study, can transfer the cavity-causing bacteria from the parent to the infant, increasing the risk of tooth decay as the child grows, says the ADA. (It should be noted that adults do not pass *Strep mutans* to each other.)

"A child's teeth are susceptible to decay as soon as they begin to erupt," says Dr. Jonathan Shenkin, a pediatric dentist in Maine and pediatric dental spokesperson for the ADA. "Cavity-causing bacteria can be transferred from adult saliva to children, increasing their risk of getting cavities."

A 2006 study from the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry and Public Health also looked at the transfer of oral bacteria from parent to child. In the study, 46 mother/child pairs were observed, and in 38 of those pairs, the mothers passed oral bacteria to their children, thus increasing the children's risk of developing cavities.

The first step parents and caretakers can take to help prevent passing cavity-causing bacteria is by maintaining good oral hygiene themselves. This is another reason why it's very important to brush and floss regularly and to visit the dentist at least twice a year. Not to mention that it sets a good example for your child.

It's also important for young children to maintain good oral health, as a healthy mouth is less susceptible to these bacteria. In addition, starting children on a path to healthy habits will lead to a lifetime of better health. Parents should protect the dental health of their children by promoting a healthy diet, monitoring their intake of sugary food and beverages, having infants finish their bedtime or naptime bottle before going to sleep, and making sure to brush their teeth or wipe their gums after they finish the bottle, as well as after meals.

One more way to make sure your baby is on the right path to good oral health is to book his or her first dental appointment and continue with regular checkups. The ADA, MDS, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and Massachusetts Academy of Pediatric Dentistry all recommend the age-one dental visit, which means that children should receive their first dental visit within six months of eruption of the first tooth and no later than 12 months of age.

When it comes to doing what's best for your baby, make sure you share your love and good oral health habits . . . but not your saliva.