

17 Teething and Looking After Teeth

Don't waste time worrying about when your baby's teeth will come through. This is one of the things decided by his own genetic blueprint and with teeth, as with so many other things, very little can affect the working of this blueprint. However precocious or backward a child may be in other ways, his teeth come through at the time and in the order preordained by nature. Illness and malnutrition, which would affect general growth, have little effect on the rate of teething.

A few babies have a tooth already through at birth. This sometimes has to be removed because it is loose and therefore might be inhaled. It would not matter if it were swallowed since it would pass easily through the intestine. If it is well fixed in the gum it should be left alone, since removal unfortunately means there will be a gap for years, until the second dentition appears. The presence of a tooth is not a contraindication to breast feeding (p. 94).

At the other end of the scale, it is normal for some babies to be toothless at the age of one year. This does not mean they have been poorly nourished before or after birth, or that you have done something wrong. A dentist can advise you if teeth fail to appear within a reasonable time. You can do nothing to hurry up or slow down the process of teething. Nor do you have to teach your baby to bite or to chew; these are built-in reflexes (p. 201).

Teething takes a long time. To some parents it seems like an eternity! It starts while the baby is in the uterus and goes on till his wisdom teeth come through, usually during his teens, but often later. By the time he is born, all the milk teeth are present inside the jaw and the permanent teeth are starting to develop (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Teeth already formed in the gums of a newborn baby.

Is he Teething?

There is no point at which one can say for sure that a baby is teething or is not teething, but when at around six months the first tooth appears through the gum, it is tempting to blame it for any unexplained crying or grizzliness. Teething is often used to explain a baby's behaviour for some weeks before a tooth actually appears, and from then on 'teething', like 'the wind' (p. 84f.) which preceded it, is a convenient scapegoat for anything that goes wrong.

Teething and Illness

There is little harm in blaming teething for your baby's bad moods, but it is really dangerous to use it to account for an illness. Sadly, doctors are always having to deal with cases of serious infection brought late because the symptoms were at first put down to teething.

Since babies cannot tell you where they feel pain, the first sign of a sore throat or urinary infection will be loss of appetite. If your baby suddenly goes off his feeds at a time when you think he may be teething, never consider that to be the reason. Let your doctor decide. Another dangerous belief is that teething causes convulsions (p. 583). This is never true.

Nor is it true that some babies 'cut their teeth with bronchitis'. A baby may have bronchitis, nappy rash or any other complaint while cutting teeth, but this is hardly surprising since he is cutting teeth throughout most of babyhood. Bronchitis needs treatment whenever it occurs; it should not be ignored in the hope that it will 'go away' when the tooth is through. However, many cases of supposed bronchitis turn out to be false alarms; the extra saliva produced by the eruption of a tooth may make a baby cough and gurgle so that you think he has bronchitis.

In fact, during the period between six months and two years, when teeth are appearing fast and furious, your baby may suffer from a number of symptoms which need diagnosing and treating; the fact that the natural process of teething is also taking place is irrelevant.

VARIED REACTIONS TO TEETHING

What difference does teething make? There is a great deal of truth in the saying that teething only produces teeth. In most babies it causes no trouble. But babies vary in their tolerance of the minor local discomfort caused by an erupting tooth. One baby may have a slightly red gum and a pink patch on his cheek in the region of the tooth, but his mother may not even notice it, because he makes no complaint. Another mother may notice the swollen gum because her baby's grumbling makes her look for the reason. Most of the village mothers in developing countries know nothing about our sort of teething, so their babies do not 'teethe' in our sort of way.