



Mothers' experiences of talking with dentists about breastfeeding

How do mothers experience communicating with dentists about breastfeeding and tooth decay? NCT breastfeeding counsellor Hannah Lynes summarises online discussions of mothers in the UK.

This article accompanies one by NCT breastfeeding counsellor Joanna Doherty looking at the evidence about breastfeeding and tooth decay and the support that practitioners can provide to parents.

Searching online discussions, mainly on Netmums and Mumsnet, about visits to dentists by breastfeeding mothers over the last 10 years, most relate to dentists saying that breastfeeding causes tooth decay. However, a few dentists are equally adamant that this is not the case.

The dentist said that as soon as her teeth had come through, what I should have been doing is taking her off the breast before she fell asleep.

In particular, mothers have been told that the following practices may contribute to tooth decay:

– **breastfeeding for more than a given amount of time (e.g. six months, nine months or a year)**

One dentist is reported as saying, “It’s best for six months but then becomes counterproductive because it damages teeth.” Another mother says, “My dentist blamed me bfing dd1 until 12 months for decay on dd1’s teeth.”

– **breastfeeding a baby to sleep**

“The dentist said that as soon as her teeth had come through, what I should have been doing is taking her off the breast before she fell asleep, cleaning her teeth (which presumably would have the effect of waking her right up again), and then getting her off to sleep by rocking etc.”

– breastfeeding at night

“They said it’s caries from breastfeeding at night and that I should stop.”

“The dentist also told me to stop bf-ing as he thought night feeding was the cause.”

– **comfort feeding**

A dental nurse says, “If the child is using the breast as a comforter rather than purely for feeding the milk CAN pool around the teeth.”

Dentists describe or are reported as describing breastmilk as “very sweet,” “high in sugar,” and “bad for teeth.” One mother says the dentist “made me feel like breastmilk was the devil’s drink for teeth.”

Message to stop breastfeeding

A significant number of mothers report receiving directive advice from their dentist to stop breastfeeding, in several cases as early as six months. Comments include:

“As soon as I answered about breastfeeding she said yep that’s it, you need to stop!”

“My dentist told me to stop breastfeeding.”

“They are also very convinced that the breastmilk causes tooth decay because of the sugar and that I need to stop breastfeeding her.”

“She expressed surprise I was still breast feeding initially then suggested I stop sooner rather than later.”

“Her – SO you’ve stopped breastfeeding (statement, not a question).

Me – No, I am breastfeeding him. Her – You’ll have to stop that.”

“They said it’s caries from breastfeeding at night and that I should stop.”

“The dentist said I shouldn’t be breastfeeding her, I should have stopped when she was six months old.”

Mixed feelings: dread, guilt and anger

Mothers describe their dentists’ reactions as “horrified,” “shocked,” “surprised,” or “like I had two heads” when the mother said she was breastfeeding.

There are instances of dentists appearing to blame mothers for their children's tooth decay. Comments include "They gave her a bollocking for long term breastfeeding," "She then found out I had breastfed for 2 year + and again that was blamed" and "the dentists all made me feel guilty."

A mother describes her experience of taking her child to the dentist as "awful" and "negative," and another says "this is the first time anyone has ever implied that I'm doing my child harm by b/feeding so I was a bit taken aback." One mother says she is "dreading" taking her child to the dentist and another describes having to "brave the dentist."

Mothers describe having to educate their dentist and to make the case for breastfeeding.

Dental nurses, receptionists and health visitors are all also mentioned as suggesting that breastfeeding causes tooth decay.

Some mothers accept their dentists' view that breastfeeding contributed to tooth decay and these mothers tend to feel guilty and to report having been "used as a human dummy" or "used as a comforter" by their baby. One mother says, "I have always felt guilty over the excessive feeding/feeding to sleep when it went beyond nutritional need."

Others do not accept that breastfeeding contributed to their child's tooth decay and these mothers may feel anger towards their child's dentist (two mothers describe themselves as "fuming").

Questions that mothers need answering

Also reflected in the online discussions are the following questions or dilemmas:

- how to find a dentist who is supportive of breastfeeding;
- whether to stop breastfeeding;
- whether to continue to breastfeed a child to sleep; and
- whether it's OK to breastfeed a child after an operation to have teeth extracted.

See accompanying piece by consultant paediatric dentist Claire Stevens, 'Treating children with decayed teeth: a dentist's point of view', and by breastfeeding counsellor Joanna Doherty, 'Breastfeeding and dental health'.