The term “teething” refers to a process where a baby’s teeth begin to push through the gums. This process usually begins around 6 months of age. By the age of 3 years, most children will have a complete set of baby teeth (primary teeth).

With some babies, the first sign of teething may be the appearance of a tooth. Other babies may experience a few symptoms or signs that a tooth may be appearing.

What are the common symptoms associated with teething?

Often babies who are teething may experience the following symptoms:

- Red or swollen gums
- Excessive drooling
- Mild rash or irritation around the mouth or chest due to drooling
- Trouble sleeping or restlessness due to sore gums
- General fussiness (due to sore, swollen gums)
- Rubbing gums, biting or sucking to relieve pressure on gums
- Rubbing the ear or cheek on the side where the tooth is erupting
- Refusal to eat or drink due to a sore mouth
- Mild fever (up to 38°C)

Usually these symptoms begin about 3-5 days before the tooth appears and then disappear after the tooth has broken through the gum. If the symptoms persist, it is important to refer the baby to a doctor.

Many people blame teething when a child has diarrhoea, a high temperature or a nappy rash. Although teething may be associated with an increase in temperature, a fever above 38°C should not be attributed to teething. You may ask why these symptoms often occur around the time a baby is teething. It is around the time of the first tooth appearing, (approximately 6-12 months of age), that the baby’s own developing immune system begins to take over from its mother’s. The baby is then more vulnerable to a wide variety of illnesses, most of them minor.

It is important not to blame the following symptoms on teething:

- Fever (especially over 38°C)
- Diarrhoea
- Runny nose, cough
- Continued fussiness
- A rash over the body

These symptoms are much more likely to be due to another cause, such as a viral illness. It is important to refer the baby to a doctor if these symptoms persist or are severe.

Symptoms of teething may be temporarily eased by the following methods:

**Home remedies:**

- Apply gentle pressure to the gums by rubbing them with a clean finger, clean wash-cloth or wet gauze
- Cool liquid-filled teething rings in the fridge (not freezer) for the baby to chew; attach to clothing, not around the neck, to avoid strangulation
• Fresh or frozen fruit or vegetables, such as banana or cucumber (peeled), may ease the pain and inflammation. Sugar-free teething rusks are also helpful. Always supervise a baby to prevent choking. This option should only be used for babies who have already started on solid foods.
• Reassuring and comforting a fussing baby has been shown to be a very effective teething remedy.

Topical analgesics
A variety of topical analgesics to rub on a baby’s gums are available in the pharmacy. It is important to be familiar with the ingredients in each of these products, as some of them have been associated with adverse reactions, especially if not used correctly.

Products containing benzocaine, a local anaesthetic, has been associated with a rare, but serious condition known as methaemoglobinaemia. Other products containing lidocaine have been associated with serious (sometimes fatal), side-effects in babies and children. It is thought that any benefit of these topical analgesics may be due to the pressure applied to the gums when applying the medication. The use of topical analgesics for teething in babies is no longer recommended in the United States, due to the risks of such treatment outweighing the benefits.

Other topical medications contain choline salicylate which may cause a chemical burn if used too often. Choline salicylate contains an aspirin-like ingredient and should be avoided if the child has a sensitivity to salicylates. In the United Kingdom, the use of choline salicylate is not recommended for children under 16 years due to a possibility of Reye’s Syndrome.

If topical analgesics are to be used for teething, it is very important to advise the caregiver to use the product as per the manufacturer’s instructions. Also, be careful not to duplicate medication by administering a topical preparation that has the same ingredient as an oral medication for teething.

Oral analgesics
Paracetamol or ibuprofen may be given to a child to help relieve the pain associated with teething. Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions regarding age and dosing when recommending pain medication. Oral medications should not be used on a regular basis and only if home remedies, (see above), are not helping.

Teething Don’ts
Do Not:
• Rub alcohol on the gums
• Dip a dummy (pacifier) into honey or jam
• Add sugar or honey to feeding bottles
• Give or use anything which may be a choking hazard for the child

Always remember that teething is a natural process that all children experience. Reassure and advise the caregiver that mild symptoms will gradually disappear, while making them aware that persistent or severe symptoms should be checked out with the doctor.

References