

# Children's Health



## Preventing Tooth Decay In Young Children

(NAPSA)—Dental caries, also known as tooth decay, is the most common chronic disease in children in the United States—and your child's pediatrician, family doctor, or nurse can play an important role in prevention.

Tooth decay occurs when bacteria in the mouth uses the sugar in food and drinks to make acids. These acids wear away the outer layer of the tooth (also known as tooth enamel). Tooth decay can eventually lead to a hole, or cavity, in the tooth.

Any child whose teeth have erupted (are visible in the mouth) can develop tooth decay. In fact, almost half of children ages 2 to 11 in the United States today have signs of decay in their baby teeth—and these numbers are increasing. Baby teeth, the first set of teeth to come in, are particularly vulnerable because the tooth's enamel has not yet had the chance to harden. Tooth decay can lead to cavities, infection, pain and loss of teeth, and can affect children's growth, speech and appearance.

### Simple Ways To Prevent Tooth Decay

The good news is that tooth decay is preventable and there are many things you can do to keep your child's teeth healthy and strong. For example, make sure children visit a dentist or primary care clinician regularly, eat a healthy diet that limits sugars, and brush every day with toothpaste that includes fluoride.

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that protects against tooth decay by strengthening tooth enamel. Fluoride is added to most, but not all, types of toothpaste. In addition, fluoride is found naturally in some water sources, and many communities across the United States boost the level of fluoride in their water



### Primary care professionals can play an important role in young children's oral health.

supply to improve the oral health of residents. Young children who live in communities without fluoride added to drinking water are at an increased risk for developing tooth decay.

### How Primary Care Clinicians Can Help

Dentists are the main sources of oral health care but only one child in four under age 6 visits a dentist. Fortunately, most children visit a pediatrician, family doctor or other nondental health care professional. Recognizing this, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recently recommended two ways that doctors and nurses can help prevent cavities in babies and children up to age 5:

1. Clinicians should prescribe oral fluoride supplements (such as drops, tablets or lozenges) to children whose water supply doesn't contain enough fluoride. This should start when the child is 6 months old.

2. All babies and children who do not regularly visit a dentist and whose teeth have come in should have fluoride varnish applied regularly by a nondental primary care professional. This

can benefit all children—regardless of the level of fluoride in their water.

What does this mean for you and your child? Your child's doctor or nurse will likely want to talk with you about oral health during an office visit. Use this time to discuss your child's risk factors for tooth decay. If he or she is not yet seeing a dentist, be sure to mention this. Your child's doctor can help you plan an appropriate timeline for scheduling a dentist visit.

### The Importance Of A Healthy Smile

Preventing tooth decay improves children's health and well-being. If left untreated, tooth decay can lead to pain, infection and loss of the affected teeth and can negatively affect a child's growth, speech, appearance, self-esteem and more. Dental-related concerns lead to the loss of over 54 million school hours (approximately 8 million school days) each year, emphasizing the need for early prevention. Talk to your child's doctor or nurse about cavities and make sure your children are getting the care they need to have healthy smiles for life.

### Protecting Your Family's Health

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is an independent group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that makes recommendations on primary care services. Recently, the Task Force reviewed the research on preventing tooth decay in the primary care setting for children ages 2 to 5.

### Learn More

For further information on the Task Force and to read the full report on preventing tooth decay in young children, visit [www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org](http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org).