

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Draft Recommendation on Preventing Cavities in Young Children

Task Force recommends primary care clinicians use fluoride varnish and fluoride supplementation in children younger than 5 years old to prevent tooth decay

WASHINGTON, D.C. – May 11, 2021 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today posted a draft recommendation statement on screening and interventions to prevent dental caries, often referred to as cavities or tooth decay, in children younger than 5 years old. The Task Force recommends that primary care clinicians apply fluoride varnish to the primary teeth of all infants and children and prescribe oral fluoride supplementation to children 6 months and older whose water supply doesn't contain enough fluoride. **These are B recommendations.** The Task Force also determined that there is not enough evidence to recommend for or against primary care clinicians screening for cavities in children younger than 5 years old. **This is an I statement.**

Grades in this recommendation:

B: Recommended.

I: The balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

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Cavities are the most common chronic disease in children in the United States and rates are on the rise, particularly in children ages 2 to 5 years old. If left untreated, they can lead to pain and loss of the affected teeth and can negatively affect a child's speech, appearance, and growth. Fluoride varnish and fluoride supplementation are preventive services that primary care clinicians can easily provide in their offices to help prevent tooth decay.

"Children regularly visit a primary care setting for checkups, which provides an important opportunity for clinicians to play a role in helping reduce and prevent cavities," says Task Force member Michael Cabana, M.D., M.A., M.P.H. "Primary care clinicians can help keep children's teeth healthy by using fluoride in those younger than 5 years old."

Any child whose teeth have come in can develop cavities. But, Hispanic and Black children and children in low-income households are at higher risk for tooth decay and often experience more severe tooth decay than other children. Additional factors that put children at higher risk for cavities or tooth decay include frequent sugar exposure, level of fluoride in their water, previous tooth decay, and developmental defects of tooth enamel.

"Using fluoride to help prevent cavities in young children is simple and easy for primary care clinicians to do," says Task Force member Martha Kubik, Ph.D., R.N. "Since tooth decay can negatively affect children's growth and development, these interventions are important to helping maintain children's health and well-being."

The Task Force also reviewed the evidence on screening exams for tooth decay in primary care. However, more research is needed to determine if having primary care clinicians regularly screen young children for tooth decay improves children's future health.

The Task Force's draft recommendation statement and draft evidence review have been posted for public comment on the Task Force website at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org. Comments can

be submitted from May 11, 2021, to June 7, 2021, at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/tfcomment.htm.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

Dr. Cabana is a professor of pediatrics and the chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. He is also physician-in-chief at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

Dr. Kubik is a professor and director of the School of Nursing, College of Health and Human Services at George Mason University. Dr. Kubik is a nurse scientist, active researcher, and past standing member on the National Institutes of Health's Community-Level Health Promotion Study Section. Dr. Kubik is an advanced practice nurse and fellow of the American Academy of Nursing.

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