

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Recommends Two Ways Primary Care Clinicians Can Prevent Tooth Decay in Young Children

Evidence shows benefit in fluoride supplements and fluoride varnish

WASHINGTON, D.C. – May 5, 2014 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today published its final recommendation statement on the prevention of dental caries (tooth decay), in children ages 5 years and younger. The Task Force recommends that primary care clinicians prescribe oral fluoride supplementation (such as drops, tablets, or lozenges) starting at age 6 months for children whose water supply is deficient in fluoride. The Task Force also recommends that primary care clinicians apply fluoride varnish to the teeth of all infants and children, starting at the age of primary tooth eruption. These are B grade recommendations that apply to primary care clinicians in a medical setting.

Any child whose teeth have come in can develop tooth decay, and nearly half of children ages 2 to 11 years have dental caries in their baby teeth.

“Three out of four preschool-age children ages 5 years and younger do not visit a dentist, but most see a primary care clinician,” says Task Force chair Michael LeFevre, M.D., M.S.P.H. “This means that primary care clinicians can play an important complementary role in helping dentists keep children’s teeth healthy.”

Children whose water supply is deficient in fluoride are at particular risk for tooth decay. Tooth decay is preventable. If left untreated, it can cause serious health complications, such as pain and loss of the affected teeth. It can also negatively affect children’s speech, appearance, and growth.

“Evidence shows that there are two ways primary care clinicians can help prevent tooth decay in preschool-age children: by providing oral fluoride supplements to children 6 months and older if their water supply doesn’t contain enough fluoride, and by applying fluoride varnish to the teeth of all infants and children,” Task Force member Linda Baumann, Ph.D., R.N. says. “By preventing tooth decay, these interventions can improve children’s health and well-being.”

Fluoride varnish is safe and easy for a primary care clinician to apply, and can benefit all children, regardless of the level of fluoride in their water.

There is still not enough evidence to determine if regularly screening for tooth decay in children ages 5 years and younger will improve children’s future health. As a result, the Task Force is not able to recommend for or against such screening. This is an I statement.

The Task Force’s final recommendation statement has been published online in *Pediatrics*, as well as on the Task Force Web site at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org. A fact sheet that explains the recommendation statement in plain language is also available. A draft recommendation was available for public comment May 21 to June 20, 2013.

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

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