

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

*Task Force recommends primary care clinicians apply fluoride varnish and prescribe fluoride supplementation in children younger than 5 years old to prevent cavities*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – December 7, 2021 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today published a final 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 teeth of all children beginning when their teeth first start coming in and prescribe oral fluoride supplementation for 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 regularly screening for cavities with an exam 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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Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in children in the United States and can develop in any child whose teeth have come in. If left untreated, cavities can lead to pain and loss of the affected teeth and can negatively affect children's speech, appearance, and growth. Many children under 5 years old do not see dentists but do regularly see their primary care clinicians for checkups and when they are sick. Fluoride varnish and fluoride supplementation are preventive services that primary care clinicians can easily provide in their offices to help prevent tooth decay.

"Primary care clinicians have an important role in helping to prevent cavities in children under 5 years old," says Task Force member Michael Cabana, M.D., M.A., M.P.H. "By applying fluoride varnish starting when children's teeth first come in, and prescribing fluoride supplements for children with low fluoride in their water supply, clinicians can help keep their young patients' teeth healthy."

While any child whose teeth have come in can develop cavities, Hispanic and Black children and children in low-income households are at higher risk of developing and having untreated tooth decay than other children. Other factors that put children at higher risk for tooth decay include frequent sugar consumption, low fluoride levels in water, previous tooth decay, poor oral hygiene, and developmental defects of the tooth enamel.

"Tooth decay can lead to a variety of health issues that affect children's development and well-being, including pain and tooth loss," says Task Force member Martha Kubik, Ph.D., R.N. "Fluoride effectively prevents tooth decay in children, is safe, and can be provided by a primary care clinician."

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

The Task Force's final recommendation statement and corresponding evidence summary have been published online in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as well as on the Task Force website at: <http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org>. A draft version of the recommendation statement and evidence review were available for public comment from May 11, 2021 to June 7, 2021.

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 general pediatrician and 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 with 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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