

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Final Recommendations on Screening and Preventive Interventions for Oral Health

More research is needed to recommend for or against screening and interventions in non-dental primary care settings for school-aged children and adults without symptoms

WASHINGTON, D.C. – November 7, 2023 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today published final recommendation statements on oral health screening and preventive interventions for children 5 years and older as well as adults. The Task Force determined that there is not enough evidence to recommend for or against screening and preventive interventions in non-dental primary care settings in people without signs or symptoms. **These are I statements.**

Grade in these recommendations:

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

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Recognizing the importance of oral health in overall health and the access barriers that many people face, the Task Force examined whether primary care clinicians might play a role in complementing the work of dental professionals. For children 5 years and older, the Task Force looked for evidence on preventing dental caries (cavities), while for adults, it focused on preventing cavities and periodontal disease (gum disease).

“The Task Force needs more evidence on whether and how primary care professionals can promote good oral health in school-aged children, adolescents, and adults,” says Task Force member John Ruiz, Ph.D. “Healthy teeth and gums are an important part of overall health, so it is essential that research focuses on oral health screening and preventive interventions in the primary care setting.”

Risk factors for developing oral health problems include lack of brushing and flossing teeth, high sugar diets from both beverages and food, low fluoride exposure, tobacco use, and developmental defects in teeth. Social factors also may increase risk of oral health conditions. Low socioeconomic status, lack of dental insurance, and living in communities with dental professional shortages may limit access to dental care. Race and ethnicity are also associated with risk of oral health problems, as a result of social rather than biologic drivers of health. Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American/Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children and adults are all disproportionately affected by oral health conditions.

“Although available evidence is limited, the Task Force recognizes that many people lack access to dental care, so primary care professionals should use their judgment when deciding whether to screen or perform preventive interventions related to oral health,” says Task Force member Li Li, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H. “Future research should include populations that are most affected by oral health conditions and social factors that contribute to disparities in oral health.”

If left untreated, oral health conditions can lead to tooth loss, irreversible tooth damage, and other serious health problems. The Task Force is calling for more research on addressing oral health in non-dental primary care settings, particularly in people who are more likely to experience oral health conditions, and on social factors that contribute to disparities in oral health. In the meantime, people with concerns about their own or their child’s oral health should talk to their healthcare professional.

For children younger than 5 years, the Task Force has a separate [recommendation](#), which recommends that primary care professionals apply fluoride varnish to the primary teeth after tooth eruption in all children under 5 and prescribe oral fluoride supplements for children with water sources deficient in fluoride.

The Task Force's final recommendation statements and corresponding evidence summaries have been published online in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as well as on the Task Force website at: <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org>. A draft version of these recommendation statements and evidence reviews were available for public comment from May 23, 2023, to June 20, 2023.

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. Ruiz is a professor of clinical psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Arizona, where he is also director of diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

Dr. Li is a family physician and the Walter M. Seward professor and the chair of family medicine at the University of Virginia (UVA) School of Medicine. He is also the director of population health at UVA Health and leader of the Cancer Prevention and Population Health program at the UVA Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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