

Children's Oral Health

Overview

Cavities (also known as caries or tooth decay) are one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood in the United States. Untreated cavities can cause pain and infections that may lead to problems with eating, speaking, playing, and learning. Children who have poor oral health often [miss more school and receive lower grades than children who don't.](#)

- About 1 of 5 (20%) children aged 5 to 11 years have at least one untreated decayed tooth.¹
- 1 of 7 (13%) adolescents aged 12 to 19 years have at least one untreated decayed tooth.¹
- Children aged 5 to 19 years from low-income families are twice as likely (25%) to have cavities, compared with children from higher-income households (11%).¹

The good news is that cavities are preventable. Fluoride varnish can prevent about one-third (33%) of cavities in the primary (baby) teeth.² Children living in communities with fluoridated tap water have fewer cavities than children whose water is not fluoridated.³ Similarly, children who brush daily with fluoride toothpaste will have fewer cavities.⁴

Dental sealants can also prevent cavities for many years. Applying dental sealants to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth prevent 80% of cavities.⁵

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

For Babies

- Wipe gums twice a day with a soft, clean cloth in the morning after the first feeding and right before bed to wipe away bacteria and sugars that can cause cavities.
- When teeth come in, start brushing twice a day with a soft, small-bristled toothbrush and plain water.
- Visit the dentist by your baby's first birthday to spot signs of problems early.
- Talk to your dentist or doctor about putting fluoride varnish on your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth appears.

For children younger than 2, consult first with your doctor or dentist regarding the use of fluoride toothpaste.

For Children

- Brush their teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Drink tap water that contains fluoride.
- Ask your child's dentist to apply dental sealants when appropriate.

If your child is younger than 6, watch them brush. Make sure they use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste and always spit it out rather than swallow. Help your child brush until they have good brushing skills.

To see if your community's water is fluoridated, you can view your water system on CDC's [My Water's Fluoride](#) website. You can also call your water utility company and request a copy of the utility's most recent "Consumer Confidence Report." This report provides information on the level of fluoride in your drinking (tap) water.

If your drinking water does not have enough fluoride to prevent cavities (the optimal amount of 0.7 milligrams per Liter), ask your dentist, pediatrician, family doctor, or nurse if your child needs oral fluoride supplements, such as drops, tablets, or lozenges.

Good Dental Health Is Important for Pregnant Women

When you're pregnant, you may be more prone to gum disease and cavities, which can affect your baby's health. Follow these 3 steps to protect your teeth:

- See a dentist (it's safe!) before you deliver

- Brush twice a day
- Floss Daily

If you have nausea, rinse your mouth with 1 teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of water after you get sick. This helps wash stomach acid away and keep your tooth enamel safe.

What Are the Risk Factors for Cavities?

Your child's chance of getting cavities can be higher if:

- Family members (older brothers, sisters, or parents) have cavities.
- They eat and drink a lot of [sugary foods and drinks](#), like soda, especially between meals.
- They have special health care needs.
- They wear braces or orthodontics or oral appliances.

If any of these apply to your child, be sure to talk with your dentist, pediatrician, or family doctor to make sure you are taking extra steps to protect your child's teeth.