

The Medical Provider's Role in Early Childhood Caries Prevention

Early Childhood Caries (ECC) is any tooth decay in a child under 6 years of age. While some children may only have one tooth that is decayed, and some may have multiple teeth that are decayed (as shown in the picture to the right) it is important to understand that **tooth decay in childhood is not normal and can be prevented.**



Early Childhood Caries is a devastating problem in young children. Not only can it cause pain and loss of teeth, but it also affects self esteem, speech development, nutrition, and school attendance. More than 40% of children have tooth decay before they reach kindergarten.

The IHS has started a new initiative to draw attention to this problem, which afflicts more than half of Native American children. Medical providers—nurses, pediatricians, or any physician—play an important role in ECC prevention. Since access to dental care is often difficult (overall, less than 25% of Native Americans/Alaska Natives are able to access dental care in our facilities), medical providers are often the ones who do see these children at an early age, whether it is for routine immunizations or for other issues. Your ability to provide early oral health assessments, fluoride varnish, and timely referrals to your dental department could help prevent costly ECC interventions down the road. Below and on the back of this sheet is information on how you as a medical provider can help make a difference in our fight against ECC.

Best Practices

1. **Fluoride Varnish** has been shown to prevent cavities forming as well as slowing down the progression of decay once it starts. It is most effective when applied 3-4 times a year.
2. **Early Access to Dental Care** may help keep children from having to be treated for severe decay in an operating room. The IHS has a slogan, “Two is Too Late,” which means that prevention has to happen early, before age two. That’s why our medical partners are so important in this fight against tooth decay—you see children and their parents at an early age.



*Together, we CAN
make a difference!*



What can medical providers do to

1. Oral Health Assessment—

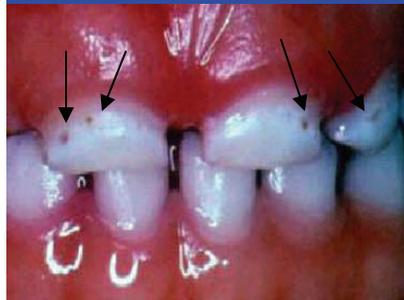
Medical providers can do oral health assessments on young children (**especially 6-24 month-olds at well-child exams**) to look for chalky spots, black spots in grooves, and cavities (holes in teeth). When doing a screening, wipe teeth with gauze and position the child as shown in this picture (called “knee to knee”). Below are some pictures that can help you. If you see any obvious cavities, refer the child to the dental clinic.



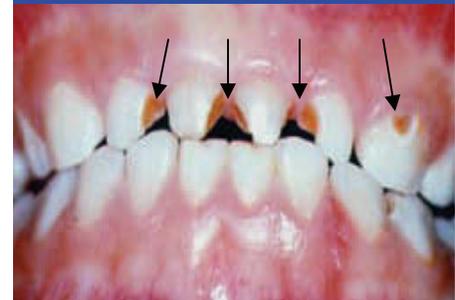
White spot lesions—
APPLY FLUORIDE VARNISH



Early cavities (brown spots)—
REFER TO DENTAL CLINIC
APPLY FLUORIDE VARNISH



Severe decay (holes in teeth)—
REFER TO DENTAL CLINIC
APPLY FLUORIDE VARNISH



2. Apply fluoride varnish—

Start by getting fluoride varnish, gauze, and gloves. Wipe all teeth dry with gauze and wipe varnish over all of the teeth, inside and out. Don't worry about getting it on the gums. It should only take a minute or less to apply varnish. Fluoride varnish should be applied 3-4 times each year to help prevent tooth decay and to stop existing decay from getting worse. **There is evidence that you can prevent ECC by applying fluoride varnish 4 times between the ages of 6-24 months during well-child exams.**



3. Provide Positive Oral Health Messages—

Take the time to talk to parents about the following:

- ◆ Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste beginning when the first tooth erupts.
- ◆ Apply 3-4 fluoride varnish treatments a year.
- ◆ Never put baby in bed with a bottle.
- ◆ Limit the intake of sugary foods and drinks.

The **IHS Early Childhood Caries Initiative** is a collaborative project that includes dental staff, medical staff, Community Health Representatives, WIC, and other key stakeholders in the health of children. As part of the ECC Initiative, a webpage has been designed to provide resources for you. On this webpage there is also an online course on “How to Apply Fluoride Varnish.”

To learn more about the ECC Initiative, visit the following webpage:http://_____