



Your Health: The war on cavities begins earlier

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Kids in Massachusetts day care centers and preschools have a new activity to fit in between napping, coloring and snacking: They have to brush their teeth (or have them brushed by a staffer).

Under new regulations that took effect in January, Massachusetts became the first state to require tooth-brushing for kids who spend more than four hours a day or have meals in licensed centers.

The edict has prompted some complaints from already-busy child care workers and from parents who don't want the hand of Big Brother in their children's mouths (though parents can opt children out of the program). But "we're also hearing lots of positive feedback," says Sherri Killins, head of the state's Department of Early Education and Care. "We think it's the right policy."

And it's just one new line of attack on a somewhat surprising problem: Despite widespread water fluoridation and advances in dental care, cavities were more common among young children in the early 2000s than they were a decade earlier, according to the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"Cavities are alive and well in the United States," says William Berlocher, a pediatric dentist in Corpus Christi, Texas, and president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. One-third of children already have cavities by ages 3 to 5, he says.

The problem is widespread, especially among poor children, but "it's largely preventable," says Inyang Isong, a pediatrician at [Massachusetts General Hospital](#) for Children, Boston. The preschool brushing program is "a wonderful idea," she says.

Cavities occur when bacteria break down minerals in teeth, causing decay. The bacteria can pass person-to-person, so tooth decay is, in fact, an infectious disease.

But a big suspect in rising rates is sugar. It works with bacteria to decay teeth faster. Many kids today eat and drink it almost constantly. Meanwhile, they may drink little water or may drink unfluoridated bottled brands. Overuse of milk- or juice-filled bottles and sippy cups may also contribute.

Many people believe that cavities (or caries) in baby teeth are no big deal, says Janet Serwint, a pediatrician at [Johns Hopkins University School of](#)

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Medicine, Baltimore. In this month's *Pediatrics*, Serwint writes: "Parents and pediatricians would readily pay attention if a child's finger or toe was eroding, but erosion of a tooth from caries is often ignored."

But those cavities can lead to pain, tooth loss, eating problems, poor speech and ruined smiles, she says. Untreated, they can lead to serious infections and deaths, as in the well-publicized case of a Maryland boy who died from a brain infection linked to an abscessed tooth in 2007.

Obstacles to early dentist visits

Major dental and medical groups now recommend children see a dentist by age 1. But many children lack dental insurance. Some dentists won't see small children; many won't accept Medicaid. Many parents don't know about the recommendations, Isong says. And some fear dental appointments. In a study in *Pediatrics*, Isong found that parents who skip dental checks have children who skip dental checks and that cost is not always a factor.

Berlocher's group is working with Head Start to help connect poor children with dentists. Meanwhile, many pediatricians now check teeth and apply fluoride while urging families to find dentists.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (aapd.org) says parents also should:

- Avoid sharing cups and utensils with children.
- Encourage toddlers and older children to drink fluoridated tap or bottled water between meals.
- Avoid putting children to bed with bottles or sippy cups of milk or juice.
- Help young children brush their teeth.

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