

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Draft Recommendations on Oral Health in Primary Care

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

WASHINGTON, D.C. – May 23, 2023 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today posted draft 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 primary care in people without signs or symptoms. **These are I statements.**

Grade in these recommendations:

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

[Learn more here](#)

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 can 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).

“Unfortunately, we found limited evidence on oral health screening and preventive interventions in primary care for both school-aged children and adolescents as well as adults,” says Task Force member John Ruiz, Ph.D. “We need more research to know whether and how primary care professionals can help prevent cavities and gum disease in these populations.”

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.

“It is important for future research to include populations that are most affected by oral health conditions,” says Task Force member Li Li, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H. “Given the limited evidence, we encourage healthcare professionals to use their judgment when deciding whether to screen or perform preventive interventions related to oral health for their patients.”

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 primary care, 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 oral health or their child’s 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 draft recommendation statements and draft evidence reviews have been posted for public comment on the Task Force website at <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org>. Comments can be submitted from May 23, 2023, to June 20, 2023, at <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/tfcomment.htm>.

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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