

About this document: This is an installment of the Massachusetts State Oral Health Series (MOHS), developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). The series focuses on important issues in oral health in the state through topic-specific installments to be released over time. Please visit www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-oral-health for more information.

FOCUS ON ORAL HEALTH

Practicing good oral health is an important part of maintaining good overall health, and is especially important for children and adolescents to establish healthy habits for life. **Dental caries (cavities) are the most common chronic condition in children across the United States, and can lead to further health issues later in life if not treated early.**¹ MDPH is helping to make sure children and adolescents receive the oral health care that they need through prevention and early treatment.

In Massachusetts in 2017:

25%
of middle
school
students

and

30%
of high
school
students

reported having a cavity in the past year.² Many of these cavities go untreated and can lead to infections, pain, and other health issues later in life. **Cavities are preventable** and all families can take steps to prevent them or get children to see a dentist to treat any problems early.

THE FACTS ABOUT CAVITIES

The risk factors that can lead to cavities in children and adolescents include¹:

- Poor diet, including frequent snacking on sugary or acidic foods and drinks
- Lack of fluoride in drinking water and toothpaste
- Poor dental hygiene routines, including teeth brushing
- Lack of routine visits with a dentist or dental provider

Symptoms of dental caries in children include¹:

- Toothache and sensitivity
- Pain when biting or eating anything sweet, hot, or cold
- Visible holes or staining of the teeth

**If your child is experiencing any of these symptoms, contact a dental provider as soon as possible.*

Short-term effects³:

- Pain and infections, which can lead to loss of productivity in school
- Poor eating and growth
- Lack of sleep
- Poor self-esteem

Long-term effects³:

- Bacterial infections
- Higher risk of developing future dental decay and gum disease
- Long-term financial costs for medical and dental care

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Does my MassHealth insurance cover dental care for my child?

Yes! MassHealth members under the age of 21 are fully covered for routine dental exams and services. Most private dental insurance plans also cover routine dental exams and preventive services for children and adolescents. Contact your dental insurance provider by calling the number on your insurance card or the number listed on the insurance provider's website for further details.

Where can I find a provider in my area?

MassHealth and private insurance companies can assist you to find a provider near you. MassHealth members can call a toll-free customer service number for 1-800-207-5019. MassHealth also provides an online provider directory which can be accessed at www.masshealth-dental.net.⁴

What can I do if I don't have a dental provider in my community?

Other options for dental care are available in communities across Massachusetts. These include school-based programs or portable oral health programs which provide preventive and some basic restorative care in schools and community centers across the state. Visit www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-oral-health to learn more.

At what age should my child see a dentist?

Children should see the dentist by the time they get their first tooth or by age one, whichever comes first. Consult your insurance company to find a dental provider near you.

Preventing Childhood Cavities

All those who take care of children have a role to play in making sure they have healthy teeth and gums for life. The earlier good habits are started, the better! Below are some tips:



Establish

Establish a good daily oral health routine with your child. Children should brush their teeth for two minutes two times a day. Children should also floss between their teeth once per day to remove anything the toothbrush can't reach. Before a child has teeth, use a soft cloth to wipe down the gums once per day. Ask your child if they are experiencing any pain in their teeth and, if so, contact a medical or dental provider.



Fluoridate

Fluoridation is a key to preventing cavities. Children receive the fluoride needed to keep their teeth strong through a combination of tap water and toothpaste. Make sure your toothpaste is fluoridated to keep teeth strong. Ask your dental provider about how and when to use fluoridated toothpaste.



Visit

Make sure your child visits a dental provider by the time they have their first tooth or by the time they are age one, whichever comes first. Children should be seen by a dental provider regularly.



Ask

Ask your medical and dental provider about other things that you can do to help prevent cavities and other oral health issues for your child. In particular, ask about dental sealants, a protective coating placed on children's teeth to prevent tooth decay.

References

1. CDC Children's Oral Health: https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/children_adults/child.htm
2. Data from Massachusetts YHS Survey 2017: <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/01/09/health-and-risk-behaviors-mass-youth-2017.pdf>
3. California Society of Pediatric Dentistry "The Consequences of Untreated Dental Caries in Children": http://www.cda.org/Portals/0/pdfs/untreated_disease.pdf
4. MassHealth Dental: <https://www.masshealth-dental.net/>