

# 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. Almost 80% of AI/AN children experience dental caries 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 for 0-5 year-olds

1. **Brushing twice daily** with fluoride toothpaste.
2. **Fluoride Varnish** applications 3-4 times a year.
3. **Offer healthy snacks** and avoid sweet drinks and foods.
4. **Early Access to Dental Care** may help keep children from having to be treated for severe decay in an operating room. Ask your dentist about caries stabilization.

***Together, we CAN  
make a difference!***





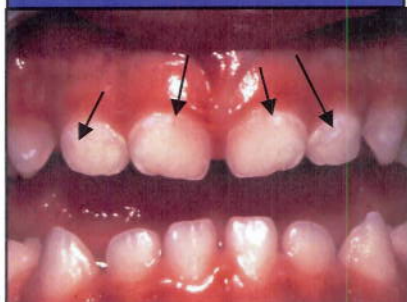
# What can medical providers do to help?

## 1. Oral Health Assessment—

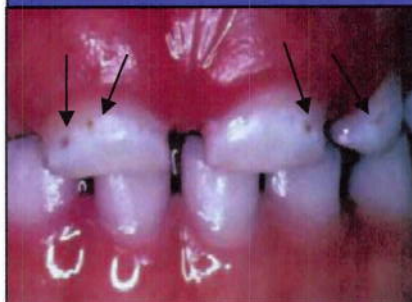
Medical providers can do oral health assessments on young children (**especially 6-24 month-olds at well-child exams**) to look for chalky spots, black spots in grooves, and cavities (holes in teeth). When doing a screening, wipe teeth with gauze and position the child as shown in this picture (called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



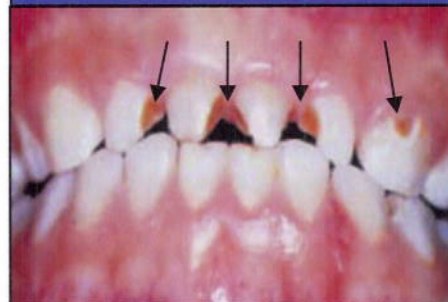
White spot lesions—  
APPLY FLUORIDE VARNISH



Early cavities (brown spots)—  
REFER TO DENTAL CLINIC



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



## 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. **There is evidence that you can prevent ECC by applying fluoride varnish 4 times between the ages of 9-24 months during well-child exams** (Holve, *IHS Provider*, October 2006). Use RPMS code V07.31 for applying fluoride varnish.



## 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 amount and frequency of sugary foods and drinks.

The **IHS Early Childhood Caries Initiative** is a collaborative project that includes dental staff, medical staff, Community Health Representatives, Head Start, WIC, and other key stakeholders in the oral health of children.

- ◆ To take the online course “How to Apply Fluoride Varnish,” and for more information about the ECC Initiative, go to: <http://www.doh.ihs.gov/ecc>.