

# Early Childhood Caries

*Early childhood caries is preventable!*



*Oral Health in Wisconsin — A Fact Sheet*

## What is Early Childhood Caries?



Early Childhood Caries formerly referred to as Baby Bottle Tooth Decay or Bottle Rot is a chronic, infectious and totally preventable oral disease that affects the primary or baby teeth of young children. Early Childhood Caries typically begins on the child's front

teeth, but in more severe cases will include back teeth as well. Untreated caries may lead to early loss of the primary teeth and affect the growth and maturation of the adult teeth. The prevalence of Early Childhood Caries has been shown to be overwhelmingly high among low-income and minority populations such as Native Americans, Hispanics and African Americans in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## What Causes Early Childhood Caries?

Early Childhood Caries is a preventable infectious disease caused by an interaction between the bacteria in your mouth, plaque (the sticky film on your teeth) and the foods you eat, especially food and liquids that contain high levels of sugar. The bacteria in your mouth uses the sugars as food, and in the process produces an acid that attacks the teeth making them susceptible to decay.



### Oral Health Tips

- ✓ Early Childhood Caries is preventable!
- ✓ Make healthy food and nutritious food choices.
- ✓ Drink plenty of fluoridated water.
- ✓ Limit between meal snacking.
- ✓ Avoid putting your child to bed with a bottle or sippy cup.
- ✓ Regular dental care assures early intervention to prevent disease.

## How Can I Protect My Child's Teeth?

The good news is Early Childhood Caries is a totally preventable disease! Research shows that your child is not born with the bacteria that causes decay but are infected with by their caregivers. If you ever had a cavity you carry the bacteria that causes cavities. Caregivers with untreated cavities have higher levels of bacteria in their mouth and are more likely to pass it on to their child.<sup>2</sup>

Your child can have a healthy mouth right from the start by simply following a few rules:

- ✓ Limit the amount and time your child consumes sugary drinks including natural fruit juices and milk .
- ✓ Dilute sugary drinks with fluoridated water.
- ✓ Never put your child to bed, even for a short nap with a bottle filled with anything but fluoridated water.
- ✓ After feeding gently clean your child's teeth and gums with gauze or a warm cloth.
- ✓ As soon as you see the first tooth erupt begin gently brushing your child's teeth twice daily.
- ✓ Make sure you are brushing twice daily with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing at least one time each day.
- ✓ Visit your family dentist regularly.

## How is Wisconsin doing?

A 2008-09 oral health assessment of Head Start children (this population typically is identified as being at a higher risk for Early Childhood Caries) indicated that ten percent of Head Start children screened had evidence of Early Childhood Caries. This is down over twelve percent points from a similar assessment done in 2002-03.

The same 2008-09 assessment revealed that one-quarter of all three year olds screened had already experienced dental decay and of those just over six percent required urgent care, meaning there was evidence of pain and infection.

## What is Wisconsin doing?

In 2009 with funding provided through a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Cooperative Agreement, a Fluoridation Specialist was hired by the Oral Health Program.

The Fluoridation Specialist provides training and ongoing technical support to primary care providers, local health departments, individuals and agencies in oral health risk assessment, anticipatory guidance and fluoride varnish application.

In addition the Fluoridation Specialist promotes statewide community water fluoridation initiatives, a proven preventive-based measure that reduces the prevalence of Early Childhood Caries.

Primary care providers in Wisconsin are able to bill the state Medicaid program for fluoride varnish applications, during regular check ups.

## References

- 1 Huntington, N.L., Kim, I.J., & Hughes, C.V. (2002). Caries-risk factors for Hispanic children affected by early childhood caries. *Pediatric Dentistry*, 24, 536-542.
- 2 California Dental Association (n.d.). Early childhood caries. <http://www.cd.org>

Adapted from a fact sheet developed by the Oral Health Program, Bureau of Health, Maine Department of Human Services, 2004, in cooperation with the Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors and funding from Division of Oral Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cooperative agreement # U58/CCU723036-01) and Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration (cooperative agreement # U44MC00177-04-02).



### For more information, contact:

Division of Public Health,  
Oral Health Program,  
PO Box 2659,  
Madison, WI 53701-2659  
(608) 266-5152