

**OPINION**

# **Marin Voice: Pandemic puts spotlight on essential steps for children's dental health**

By **DR. GILA C. DOROSTKAR** |

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February is National Children's Dental Health Month and it is now even more important during a pandemic to take care of our children's oral health.

As a pediatric dentist here in Marin, I have seen firsthand the devastating effects of dental decay in young children which only seems to have worsened since COVID-19 has turned our daily routines upside down.

Children's dental decay in the United States is the most chronic disease of childhood and contributes to more missed school days than even asthma or the flu. Children in pain have difficulty eating, speaking, sleeping and paying attention in class. Untreated decay can lead to infection and tooth loss which can require expensive and extensive emergency treatment interventions.



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The bad news doesn't stop there. Children with cavities in their baby teeth are four times more likely to have cavities in their adult teeth. I have personally noted a worrisome increase in tooth decay in toddlers and preschoolers in my practice. It is not uncommon to see 2, 3 and 4-year-olds with such extensive decay that they need general anesthesia or sedatives to complete their care safely and predictably. This reality is especially heartbreaking because it is preventable.

The first and most crucial step to growing up cavity-free is for 1-year-olds to see a dentist, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry along with the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Think of the first visit as a "well baby check" for a child's teeth and a valuable opportunity to hear best tips for taking care of baby teeth. Also, by establishing a relationship early, parents will not be frantically scrambling to find a dentist after a traumatic injury on the playground.

Another milestone step is to complete the California Kindergarten Oral Health Assessment form when children enter kindergarten. This provides information on the status of a child's teeth and links them to a dentist, if they don't have one.

Establishing a routine of brushing twice a day for two minutes with a fluoridated toothpaste is very effective in preventing cavities. Grownups should help with brushing until children are at least 8 years of age since they do not have the dexterity to do so effectively until then. Drinking fluoridated water is also beneficial in reducing decay and is supported by solid scientific research. Please note that some home filters remove fluoride from tap water and bottled water generally does not contain fluoride.

One of the highest risk factors for decay is snacking frequently throughout the day exposing teeth to repeated acid attacks. Limit snacking to only once between meals and choose foods that are not sticky and sugary. Grazing all day long has increased for many families now that we're all at home more during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The theme for this year's National Children's Dental Health month is "water, nature's drink." You'd be surprised by how much sugar is contained in our children's favorite drinks. Check labels and try to limit your child's daily added sugar intake to 25 grams or less, as recommended by the World Health Organization.



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The Department of Health and Human Services' oral health program, in collaboration with oral health professionals in Marin, is sponsoring a resolution at the Marin County Board of Supervisors meeting on Feb. 9 to highlight the importance of children's dental health in Marin. You are welcome to join the meeting online to learn more.

Additional information can also be found by visiting MarinOralHealth.org on the web, as well as the Healthy Smiles Marin Facebook page.

Let's make 2021 the year we reverse the tooth decay trend in Marin's children.

*Dr. Gila C. Dorostkar is a Marin pediatric dentist in private practice serving on the Marin County Oral Health Advisory Committee.*

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**Dr. Gila C. Dorostkar**



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