



Mott Poll Report

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Pandemic-posed Challenges to Children's Oral Health

Preventive dental care, or dental check-ups, include cleaning and examining teeth for decay or cavities. It is recommended that children get regular preventive dental care to ensure teeth are healthy and to promptly address any dental problems. However, some dental offices have changed their operations to limit the spread of COVID-19. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents about getting preventive dental care for their children age 3-18 years during the pandemic.

Sixty percent of parents have tried to get preventive dental care for their child since the pandemic started. In most cases parents say they got an appointment, 69% in the usual timeframe and 24% after a delay; 7% of parents say they were unable to get an appointment. More parents of children with Medicaid dental coverage (15%) say they were unable to get an appointment, compared to those with private dental insurance (4%) or no coverage (5%).

Forty percent of parents have not tried to get preventive dental care for their child since the pandemic started. Among this group, most cite COVID-related reasons: 40% do not want to risk getting exposed, while 23% say the dentist office was closed or only seeing urgent patients. Other parents say they did not call for an appointment because their child was not due for dental care (23%) and/or was not having any dental problems (28%). Cost is the reason for 1 in 4 parents of children with no dental insurance, but not for those with Medicaid or private dental coverage.

Most parents (67%) believe it is safe for their child to get dental care right now, while 14% feel it is not safe and 19% are unsure. One-third of parents (32%) feel COVID-19 has made it harder to get preventive dental care for their child.

Parents report changes to improve their child's oral health habits during the pandemic, including more frequent brushing (16%), flossing (11%) and use of fluoride rinse (9%), and less drinking of sugary beverages (15%). Overall, 28% of parents say their child has made at least one positive change, including more parents of children with Medicaid (37%) or no dental coverage (32%) compared to private dental insurance (24%).

Keeping kids' teeth healthy during COVID-19

Percent of parents reporting improvements in their child's oral health habits

Brushing more often

16%



Flossing more often

11%

Using fluoride rinse more often

9%



Drinking sugary beverages less often

15%



Report Highlights

1 in 3 parents say COVID-19 has made it hard to get dental care for their child.

Children with Medicaid dental coverage have had more problems getting a preventive dental appointment.

1 in 4 parents say their child's oral health habits have improved during the pandemic.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in January 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,002). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,882 parents with at least one child age 3-18. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 4 percentage points and higher among subgroups.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

The American Association of Pediatric Dentists recommends that children receive regular teeth cleaning and examination every six months, starting when their first tooth comes in. Regular dental check-ups provide a consistent opportunity for dental providers to identify and treat tooth decay before it does too much damage, to apply protective treatments like sealants and fluoride varnish, and to educate parents and children about good dental hygiene.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted dental care across the country. To protect their patients and staff, dental providers had to adjust their office flow, obtain personal protective equipment, and comply with regulations.

This Mott Poll highlights the impact of this disruption: 1 in 3 parents say the pandemic has made it harder for them to get dental care for their child. Some parents attempted to continue their child's regular dental check-ups, only to find a lengthy wait time for an appointment. Other parents found that the dental office had closed or curtailed patient visits to only urgent patients.

A challenge for parents during the pandemic has been keeping up to date on the many changes in schedules and operations, from schools to stores to health care providers. Parents who were unable to get a dental appointment for their child should check back with their regular dentist, as lengthy wait times or patient restrictions may have changed.

Barriers to dental appointments occurred more frequently for children with Medicaid dental coverage compared to those with private dental insurance or those with no dental coverage. Because many dentists do not accept Medicaid payment, it often is difficult for parents to get dental care for their Medicaid-covered child outside the pandemic. Some Medicaid-enrolled children receive preventive dental services through school or public dental clinics, but those services have decreased during the pandemic.

This Mott Poll also shows that some parents are worried about the risk of COVID-19 exposure during a dental visit and are delaying making a dental appointment for their child. Parents who are concerned about COVID exposure should contact their child's dentist to learn about what types of precautions have been put in place. These may include things like patient and staff screenings and temperature checks, having patients wait in their cars rather than the waiting room, and having patients use anti-bacterial mouthwash prior to cleanings and procedures.

It may be helpful for dental providers to be proactive in reminding parents about the importance of regular dental check-ups for children. Reminder notices and website information may outline changes to practice operations so that parents feel safe bringing children in for their visit.

Parents also described positive changes in how their children are taking care of their teeth and gums at home. Good oral health habits – daily brushing and flossing, avoiding sugary drinks – are very beneficial to preventing tooth decay. Parents whose child is not getting regular dental check-ups should take actions to improve daily oral health habits, particularly if regular dental care is delayed or disrupted.