

## Sugar Consumption and Its Correlation to Early Childhood Caries: A Global Perspective

Juan Pérez\*

School of Dentistry, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

### DESCRIPTION

Early childhood caries (ECC) is a significant public health issue that affects children worldwide, with sugar consumption being one of the primary contributing factors. ECC, commonly known as “baby bottle tooth decay,” refers to the presence of tooth decay in children under the age of six and it is one of the most common chronic diseases in young children. While the prevalence of ECC has been a longstanding concern, the global rise in sugar consumption has exacerbated the situation, especially in developing countries where dietary patterns are shifting towards higher sugar intake. This article explores the relationship between sugar consumption and early childhood caries, examining how dietary habits contribute to the development of ECC and the implications this has on a global scale.

Sugar plays a pivotal role in the development of ECC. Tooth decay occurs when bacteria in the mouth metabolize sugars, producing acids that erode the enamel, the outer protective layer of the teeth. These acids break down the enamel, leading to cavities and, if left untreated, can cause severe pain, infection and loss of teeth. The primary sugars responsible for dental caries are those found in sucrose (table sugar), fructose (in fruit juices) and glucose (in many processed foods and beverages). The frequency of sugar exposure is a major factor when sugars are consumed frequently throughout the day, the mouth is in a constant acidic state, which leads to an increased risk of tooth decay.

In young children, ECC is often linked to the consumption of sugary snacks, drinks and feeding habits. The use of sugary liquids, especially in bottles and the frequent snacking on sweet foods are common behaviors that contribute to the high prevalence of ECC. Prolonged exposure to sugar during the critical developmental years of childhood increases the likelihood of enamel demineralization, making the teeth more susceptible to decay. In many countries, parents may not be fully aware of the harmful effects of frequent sugar consumption, or they may lack access to appropriate dental education, further increasing the risk of ECC.

The global rise in sugar consumption over the past few decades has contributed significantly to the growing problem of ECC. A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) has emphasized that global sugar consumption, especially from sugary drinks, has reached alarming levels. In high-income countries, the consumption of soft drinks, candies and other sugary foods is a norm and these products are often marketed directly to children. In low- and middle-income countries, urbanization and the availability of processed, packaged foods have led to increased sugar intake among children. As a result, ECC has become more prevalent in these regions, further complicating the global dental health burden.

In the United States, for example, studies have shown that more than 40% of children aged two to five have experienced some form of dental decay, with sugar being a major contributor. Similarly, in European countries such as the UK and Germany, sugary snacks and drinks are frequently consumed by children, leading to high rates of ECC. In developing countries, such as India and Brazil, rising disposable incomes and changing dietary patterns have led to an increased consumption of sugary beverages and snacks, with ECC becoming an emerging concern.

The impact of sugar consumption on ECC is not only influenced by the amount of sugar children consume, but also by socioeconomic factors. Children from lower-income families are more likely to experience higher rates of ECC due to limited access to healthy food options, poor oral hygiene habits and insufficient dental care. In many cases, sugary foods and beverages are more affordable and accessible than healthier alternatives, making them a staple in the diets of disadvantaged children. Furthermore, in many low-income communities, there is a lack of awareness regarding the effects of sugar on dental health, which exacerbates the prevalence of ECC.

The global nature of sugar-related ECC requires a multifaceted approach to prevention. Public health strategies aimed at reducing sugar consumption, particularly among children, are essential in curbing the prevalence of ECC. The WHO has recommended that the intake of free sugars be reduced to less than 10% of total energy intake, with further benefits seen if sugar intake is reduced to below 5%. This recommendation

**Correspondence to:** Juan Pérez, School of Dentistry, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, E-mail: [juan.perez@ub.edu](mailto:juan.perez@ub.edu)

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emphasizes the need for countries to implement policies that limit the availability of sugary drinks and snacks in schools, promote healthier alternatives and encourage better dietary habits among children.

Education plays a critical role in preventing ECC. Efforts to raise awareness among parents and caregivers about the importance of reducing sugar intake, as well as improving oral hygiene practices, can have a significant impact on reducing ECC rates. The implementation of community-based oral health programs, especially in rural and underserved areas, is important in educating populations about the link between sugar consumption and tooth decay. Additionally, improving access to fluoride treatments, regular dental check-ups and early interventions can help mitigate the effects of ECC.

## CONCLUSION

Sugar consumption is a primary factor contributing to the global burden of early childhood caries. With the rising global consumption of sugary foods and beverages, ECC has become a pressing issue, particularly in children under six years old. The relationship between sugar and tooth decay is well-established and the increasing frequency of sugar consumption worldwide has only exacerbated this problem. Addressing the global challenge of ECC requires a concerted effort to reduce sugar intake, improve oral health education and enhance access to preventive dental care. By implementing effective public health strategies, raising awareness and providing better resources for oral care, it is possible to reduce the prevalence of ECC and improve the oral health of children around the world.