



American Dental Association
www.ada.org

Fact Sheet – Children’s Dental Disease

Overview

Thanks to water fluoridation, fluoridated toothpaste, improved oral hygiene and increased dental visits, there have been tremendous declines in childhood cavities. However, the chronic infectious disease that causes cavities remains second only to the common cold in terms of prevalence in children. That is why it is so important that young children see a dentist—so the dentist can provide parents with information on [children’s oral hygiene](#) and so children’s tooth decay can be prevented or treated while it is in the earliest stages.

The American Dental Association (ADA) recommends that children see a dentist no later than their first birthday, yet only 3 out of 5 children have seen a dentist before kindergarten. By then, over half (52 percent) of 6-8 year olds have tooth decay, according to the Healthy People 2000 oral health update.

Unlike a cold, tooth decay does not go away; it only gets worse. Pain from untreated dental disease makes it difficult for children to eat, sleep and pay attention in school...it affects their self-esteem.

Many children lack access to dental care, which is a critical component in achieving good oral health. The ADA founded Give Kids A Smile to raise public awareness of what the U.S. Surgeon General has called a “silent epidemic” of dental disease and to encourage parents, politicians and people who care about children to address this issue in their communities.

Following are some facts about children’s dental disease:

Many children lack private dental insurance

- The Government Accounting Office (GAO) reports that lack of dental insurance is a strong predictor of lack of dental care.
- For every child in this country without health insurance there are 2.6 without dental insurance.
- 23 million children in the United States do not have dental insurance.
- Medicaid is the health coverage for about one-fourth of all children in the United States.

Fewer and fewer children have more and more tooth decay.

- The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (of the National Institutes of Health) reports that 80 percent of tooth decay is now found in only 25 percent of children.

Tooth decay is increasingly a disease of low and modest income children—children covered by Medicaid and CHIP.

- Low income is the single best predictor of high caries experience in children. Analysis of data shows that amount of tooth decay in children is inversely related to income level.
- Children from families with annual incomes of \$10,000 to \$20,000 have 10 times more unmet dental needs than children whose families earn more than \$50,000 per year.

Medicaid and CHIP programs, which are supposed to help underserved children get the dental services they need, are chronically under-funded.

- Dental expenditures account for only 1 percent of the total budget nationally in 2001.
- Most state Medicaid budgets devote 2 percent or less to dental services for young and old alike.
- In some states, the dental portion of the Medicaid budget is as little as one half of one percent.

Low-income children do not get the dental services they need.

- Less than 1-in-5 Medicaid children receive the EPSDT—required preventive dental screening or service. ("Children's Dental Services under Medicaid" Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General).

A substantial proportion of decay in young children goes untreated, and key children's oral health indicators are slipping.

- Nearly half of tooth decay in children ages 2-9 is untreated.
- The Healthy People 2000 oral health indicators show an increase in the percentage of children who have untreated cavities (from 28 percent in 1986 to 31 percent in 1995) and a decrease in the percentage of children who see a dentist before kindergarten (from 66 percent in 1986 to 63 percent in 1995).
- "Early Childhood Caries" (Baby Bottle Tooth Decay)—a particularly severe form of rampant decay in toddlers—continues to be highly prevalent in many Native American and minority communities. (Public Health Reports Volume 110)

Parents know it is a problem.

- Among parents who feel that their children have unmet health care needs, 57 percent report that an unmet need is for dental care compared with 12 percent for vision or prescription. (1997 National Health Interview Survey)

Communities know it is a problem.

- When low-income communities assess their own health care needs, dental care for children is frequently cited in top three unmet needs. (Anecdotal report from "Health of the Cities" program and from state public health officials)
- Many states say that their greatest pediatric health care problem is lack of access to dental services for Medicaid recipients.

Health professionals know it is a problem.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that untreated tooth decay results in pain, infection, dysfunction and poor appearance/low self-esteem among affected children.
- Early childhood caries (the disease that causes tooth decay) is associated with poor growth and poor nutrition in children. (Pediatric Dentistry Volume 14)
- Untreated dental problems typically get worse and ultimately cost more. Left untreated, a child will often end up in a hospital emergency or operating room, where care is terribly expensive. In fact, based on a 1999 study published in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Medicaid-eligible children in Louisiana incurred an extra \$650 per child for dental care provided in a hospital due to operating room use and anesthesia.

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