



Talking Points: Preventing Tooth Decay



Why is Preventing Tooth Decay Important?

- The consequences of untreated tooth decay in children can include problems with eating and speaking, an inability to concentrate and reduced self-esteem.
- Untreated cavities may lead to chronic pain and tooth loss. Certain groups are at greater risk for dental problems later in life.
 - People age 65 and older who did not finish high school are more than twice as likely to lose six or more teeth due to tooth decay or gum disease compared to college graduates.
 - Approximately 65 percent of African-Americans age 65 and older have lost at least six teeth due to tooth decay or gum disease, compared to 44 percent of whites and 47 percent of Hispanics.
- Tooth loss can contribute to nutrition problems by limiting the types of food a person can eat. This can affect control of chronic diseases such as diabetes.
- Although tooth decay is not generally considered a life-threatening condition, a 12-year-old boy in Maryland died in February 2007 after bacteria from an abscessed tooth spread to his brain.
- Emerging research links oral disease with chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease, and with preterm, low birth weight deliveries.



What are the Costs of Oral Diseases and Oral Health Care?

- Children lose an estimated 50 million school hours each year to dental-related illnesses, according to a 2000 report of the U.S. Surgeon General.
- Adults lose an estimated 164 million hours of work each year because of preventable dental problems.
- Americans spent an estimated \$100 billion on dental services in 2007. That amount is projected to increase to \$160 billion within the next 10 years.



Tooth Decay in Children

- Tooth decay remains the most common chronic disease for school-age children.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports tooth decay among preschool children increased nearly 20 percent in a study from 1999 to 2004 compared with one a decade earlier. Twenty-eight percent of preschool children ages 2 to 5 had tooth decay in at least one primary (baby) tooth during the most recent study.
- One in five children ages 6 to 11 has at least one cavity in permanent teeth, which increases to three in five children and adolescents ages 12 to 19.



How Can Tooth Decay be Prevented?

- Dental sealants, which are coatings applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth, are a cost-effective option for preventing tooth decay in children and adolescents.
 - Children receiving dental sealants in school-based programs have 60 percent less decay for two to five years following the application.
 - *Healthy People 2010* calls for half of U.S. children to have dental sealants by 2010. Only about 30 percent of schoolchildren ages 6 to 11 currently have them. Fewer low-income children and children of some racial and ethnic groups have received sealants.

- Approximately 67 percent of the U.S. population uses water that has been treated with fluoride to prevent tooth decay.
 - Children in communities with fluoridated water experienced about 30 percent fewer cavities than children in places without fluoridated water systems.
 - In communities with at least 20,000 residents, every \$1 invested in community water fluoridation yields \$38 in savings resulting from fewer cavities treated.
- A comprehensive state oral health plan can be used to monitor oral diseases, such as tooth decay, and to prioritize health education and promotion programs, training programs and technical assistance to support state and local oral health programs.
- Access to regular dental care can improve prevention and treatment of cavities and other oral diseases and conditions.
- Only 20 percent of Medicaid-covered children receive any preventive dental services in a year.



What Can Legislators do to Help Promote Oral Health?

- Demonstrate leadership by supporting a state mandate for an oral health program within the department of health.
- Work with the department of health to develop a comprehensive state oral health plan.
- Develop coalitions with dental health providers to identify state and local oral health problems and implement effective strategies to address them.
- Support evidence-based programs, such as school-sponsored dental sealant programs and community water fluoridation.
- Provide accessible and affordable dental care.
 - Work with local health departments, federal Head Start programs for low-income children and other agencies to provide oral health services to at-risk populations.
 - Consider spending uncommitted State Children's Health Insurance Program funds for oral public health measures targeted at high-risk children.
 - Support funding for dental education programs that teach children the importance of brushing daily with a fluoride toothpaste.
- Consider a loan repayment program for dentists who locate in underserved areas.

To find state-by-state statistics on tooth decay, fluoridation and other oral diseases and conditions, go to:

- The CDC and ASTDD National Oral Health Surveillance System, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nohss/>
- The CDC and ASTDD Synopses of State and Territorial Dental Public Health Programs, available at <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/synopses/index.asp>.
- Other information on oral health can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth> and http://www.cdc.gov/OralHealth/state_programs/states/index.htm
- The Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors, available at <http://www.astdd.org>
- Healthy States "Promoting Improved Oral Health" Legislator Policy Brief available at <http://www.healthystates.csg.org/Publications/>

If you would like more information or references:

- Send your inquiry to healthpolicy@csg.org or
- Call the CSG Health Policy Group at (859) 244-8000