

February is National Children's Dental Health Month

Did you know that dental disease is now the most chronic childhood disease, and five times more common than asthma? It is estimated that 28 percent of 2-5 year olds have dental disease, and recent data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey shows a rise in dental caries among 2-5 year olds for the first time in 40 years. We know that poor oral health in children has serious health consequences, causes needless pain and suffering, and affects children's ability to speak, eat, and learn. In the U.S., children miss more than 51 million hours of school as a result of dental disease. Despite these facts, dental disease is overwhelmingly preventable.

Dental caries, the disease that causes cavities, is a preventable, transmissible, and progressive chronic condition. Because tooth decay in baby teeth predicts future tooth decay in permanent teeth, it is easy to anticipate that the increase in dental caries among young children today will only continue as they grow older. It is important that we focus on prevention in order to keep our children healthy and to give them the best start in life. We can do this by:

- Ensuring that children, especially those at greatest risk for dental disease, visit the dentist by age one as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and establish a dental home as a source of comprehensive care in an ongoing relationship between provider and patient.
- Ensuring that children have access to preventive measures like sealants, often offered in schools, fluoridated water and/or fluoride supplements, and access to oral health professionals for regular screenings and treatment.
- Educating families, health care providers, child care providers and others that come in contact with young children about dental caries – including how to prevent disease and manage the disease after onset.
- Ensuring that pregnant women have access to oral health care during and after their pregnancy.

The Children's Dental Health Project (www.cdhp.org) and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (www.aapd.org) are engaged in a Maternal and Child Health Bureau-supported initiative to increase access to oral health care for pregnant women and infants, and to increase public awareness of the importance of oral health. Please join us in our efforts to prevent the most chronic disease of childhood in the U.S., and to help children get the services and care they need to be healthy, happy, and to grow into productive adults.

For more information on Children's Dental Health Project and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's *Improving Perinatal and Infant Oral Health* Project, or for more resources or information, please contact:

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