

HALTING THE NEGLECTED EPIDEMIC



Oral Diseases

Oral diseases are the most common and the most untreated of all childhood diseases. Many childhood diseases—for example, measles, mumps, and whooping cough—are well managed. Some have been nearly eliminated by aggressive prevention programs. But oral diseases remain unchecked. In fact, they are the most prevalent and the most untreated childhood diseases in the country! And, by the age of six, more than 40% of U.S. children are affected by this disease.

Oral diseases are not simple annoyances—just a cavity that can be filled, or a tooth that can be extracted. For many children, tooth decay causes *severe* daily pain and interferes with eating, sleeping, speaking, learning, and playing.

Oral diseases are also very costly. A study of data from the National Health Interview Survey found that children missed more than eight million school days because of dental problems. More than \$40 billion is spent each year on prevention and treatment of dental carries in the U.S. alone.

Preventing Dental Caries

Parents and caregivers can help prevent children from developing caries in several ways. For starters, parents should provide healthy, balanced meals for children. Limit the amount of foods that contain high amounts of sugar. Cheese is a healthy food that actually fights dental caries.

Modify cleaning techniques, depending on the child's age. For small infants, gums and erupting teeth can be cleaned with a piece of clean gauze once or twice a day. As they get older, make sure your child's teeth are brushed at least twice a day—once in the morning and once before bedtime.

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Fluoride vitamins can be prescribed by the child's physician or dentist. When children under the age of six take fluoride vitamins, it becomes incorporated in their developing permanent teeth and makes it harder for acids to cause decay. Topical fluorides, such as gels, rinses, or varnish, make teeth stronger and stop the production of acids by bacteria.

Research has shown that by using sealants, caries on molar teeth can be cut by 50 per cent! Sealants are thin protective plastic coatings placed on the chewing surfaces of molars. They are recommended when the permanent molars erupt, usually around the ages of 6 and 12.

There continues to be several reasons that families do not get dental services. Many times it is the lack of transportation. In many families both parents work and must take an entire day off to take their child to the dentist. Typically, these families cannot afford the loss of income. The cost of dental care is also a large factor. Dental treatment is costly yet can be avoided by preventive services, which are much less expensive.

Initiatives have been created to help those children who don't have medical/dental insurance available to them. No-cost Medi-Cal and low-cost Healthy Families Insurance provides the opportunity for children to receive dental treatment for no or reduced fees. Parents can access assistance in qualifying for no-cost Medi-Cal or low-cost Healthy Families at their child's school site or by calling: 1-800-747-1222.

Important Facts

- California's children have twice as much untreated decay as their national counterparts.
- Only 10 per cent of California's 8-year olds get sealants for their first permanent molars.
- Only 30 per cent of Californians currently receive the benefits of fluoridated water.

For additional information, please visit our web site at:
kcsos.kern.org/kccdh/