



Oral health

Children's Alliance of New Hampshire

October 2005

Issue brief

"Watch your mouth!"

Your mother was right: Children won't have healthy bodies if they don't have healthy mouths

When your mother told you to "watch your mouth," she was wiser than perhaps either of you knew at the time. We all need to do a better job of watching our mouths. The truth is, you can't have a healthy body without a healthy mouth.

Most oral disease is preventable. When communities, schools, and public leaders work together, we can improve children's oral health through a combination of prevention and treatment. Communities can fluoridate their public water supplies. Schools can eliminate sugary snacks from cafeterias and vending machines. Public leaders can make sure that regular oral checkups, dental sealants (plastic coatings that seal the pits and grooves of molar teeth), and fluoride supplements are available to all children.

A growing body of research demonstrates that dental disease has profound effects on a child's ability to grow and learn. Untreated, tooth decay can cause chronic pain, speech problems, poor nutrition and trouble concentrating in school. Because the mouth is an integral part of the body's digestive, respiratory, and skeletal systems, childhood oral diseases may increase the risks of other health problems whose effects last into adulthood.

Yet tooth decay remains the most common childhood disease -- five times more common than asthma. More than half of New Hampshire's third-grade students have experienced tooth decay, and nearly a quarter of those with tooth decay are not treated by a dentist.

New Hampshire has taken some important steps to protect children from dental disease, including the creation of a roadmap to good oral health -- the New Hampshire Oral Health Plan (online at http://www.endowmentforhealth.org/_docs/33.pdf). The groundwork has been done, experts have compiled common-sense, cost-effective options, and it's time to roll up our sleeves.

Communities play key role

While the challenges to children's oral health are significant, the good news is that we can overcome them.

- More than one in four New Hampshire children lack dental insurance. Uninsured children are less likely to receive routine examinations, dental sealants (thin coatings placed on the chewing surface of the back teeth) or fluoride supplements that prevent decay.

Want to address the lack of dental insurance? Call your legislators and ask them to support a level of funding for the State Child Health Insurance Program (NH Healthy Kids) that enables it to reach and enroll every child who lacks health insurance. Encourage your employer to provide dental insurance for employees and their families.

- School lunches and vending machines are filled with sugary foods and beverages that promote the growth of bacteria that attack and break down the protective enamel of kids' teeth.

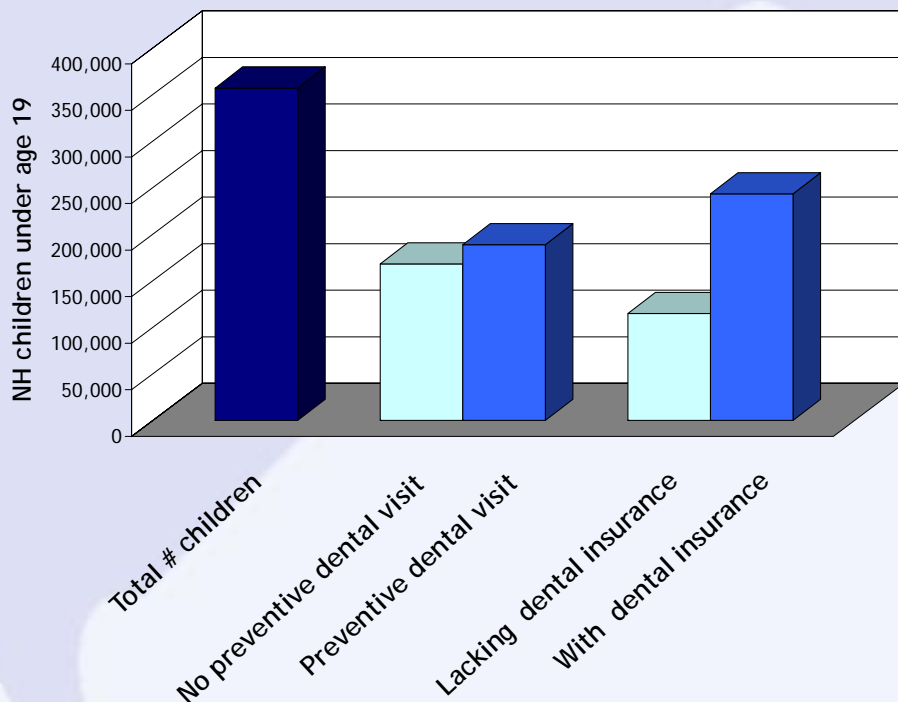
Want to reduce the prevalence of junk food? Ask your school board, school administrators and PTA to encourage nutritious meals during the school day and to remove sugar-rich foods and drinks from lunch menus and vending machines. Students spend more waking hours at school than at home. When consumed during the school day, certain foods and drinks enable sugar and bacteria to combine and break down the protective enamel of students' teeth.

- Even though fluoridation is one of the least expensive and most effective investments that communities with public water systems can make in their children,



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Children's preventive dental visits, dental insurance coverage, 2000-01



Source: "New Hampshire Oral Health Plan: A Framework for Action," Coalition for New Hampshire Oral Health Action, July 2003

fluoridated water is available to less than half of the state's residents who rely on public water supplies.

Want to maximize the health benefits of fluoride?

Find out what your community is doing and encourage others to join you in making fluoride available. Fluoride prevents and reverses the dental decay process. It keeps tooth enamel strong and solid. Fluoridation of a water supply reduces cavities by about 26% in young people. The average annual cost of fluoridating water is only 51 cents per person; over the course of a lifetime, that's less than the cost of a single filling. It's safe, effective, and thrifty.

- New Hampshire doesn't have enough dentists. Nearly one in four residents lives in an area of the state that has been designated a Dental Health Provider Shortage Area. This means that even if their families can afford dental care, there may not be enough dentists to provide regular preventive care or treatment for children.

Want to increase the number of children receiving oral health care? Ask your legislators to support the critical solutions to dentist shortages that state and school officials, doctors, dentists, hygienists and

others are advancing in some communities. Hygienists are bringing portable dental chairs into elementary schools to screen students for oral disease, apply sealants and distribute fluoride rinses. During the 2003-2004 school year, school-based dental programs in 150 schools screened more than 17,000 children who hadn't seen a dentist in the previous year. While these interventions represent great progress, they have also been targeted for state budget cuts. Parents and other advocates for children must raise our voices to support continued state support -- and even expansion -- of these solutions.

Summary

Together we can assure all children access to the preventive care and treatment they need for healthy mouths and healthy bodies. By supporting access to fluoride (through fluoride supplements and fluoridation of public water), removing unhealthy snacks and drinks from schools, and funding innovative ways to deliver dental care to children, we can

prevent disease and promote healthy bodies. It is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do.

The Children's Alliance is proud to be a part of the Watch Your Mouth Campaign, an effort to increase awareness of the critical role oral health plays in children's overall health. Let's all watch our mouths speak up for children's oral health!

To find out how you can advocate for better oral health for children, please visit the Children's Alliance of NH Web site at www.childrennh.org or the Watch Your Mouth Web site at www.watchyourmouth.org.
