

**Our children. Our state. Our future.
2006 Priorities for New Hampshire**



**Watch Your Mouth Campaign:
Children's Oral Health Critical to Overall Health**

Highlights

- ✓ Oral disease – tooth decay – is the most prevalent chronic childhood disease. Over one half of first to third grades students in New Hampshire experience tooth decay – a bacterial infection of the mouth. Approximately one quarter of these children receive no treatment.
- ✓ Nationally, over 51 million hours of school are lost each year due to dental problems.
- ✓ Prevention programs for children cost about half of what later treatment for tooth decay would cost.

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Issue overview

Children's oral health is critical to their overall health. The Surgeon General has reported that children's oral health is a critical – and largely unmet-- health issue of significant proportions. Oral disease – tooth decay – is the most prevalent chronic childhood disease, affecting half of all first graders and nearly 80% of 17 year olds. It is five times as common as childhood asthma.¹ In New Hampshire, over half of our third graders have experienced tooth decay – a bacterial infection of the mouth – and for approximately one quarter of these children, this decay remains untreated.²

Research tells us that the health of children's mouths is as important as the health of any other body part—affecting how well they feel, function and behave. Equally important, children's oral health will affect how they will develop into adulthood. Untreated tooth decay can lead to pain, inadequate nutrition, speech problems and learning problems.³ Nationally, over 51 million hours of school are lost each year due to dental problems.⁴ Scientists now believe that oral diseases are linked to chronic adult health problems such as heart and respiratory diseases.⁵

The good news is that solutions exist. We have the technology and the resources to protect our children from most tooth decay and oral disease:

- ◆ Prevention programs for children, including dental hygiene, oral health education, fluoride supplements and sealants, cost about half of what later treatment for tooth decay would cost.⁶
- ◆ Children who have regular dental visits and receive dental sealants (plastic coatings that seal the pits and grooves of molar teeth) have only one fourth the tooth decay as those without.⁷
- ◆ Fluoridation of the water supply has been shown to reduce cavities in young people by about 26%.⁸
- ◆ Community water fluoridation is safe and effective and far less expensive per person than the cost of a single filling.⁹
- ◆ Children with dental insurance are much more likely to have timely visits to a dentist.¹⁰

Our challenge is to improve an inadequate state oral health infrastructure:

- ◆ Fewer than half of New Hampshire's residents who are served by municipal water supplies benefit from fluoridation. Our Healthy New Hampshire 2010 target is 65%.¹¹
- ◆ Over one-fourth of New Hampshire's children lack dental insurance.¹²
- ◆ Nearly one in four NH residents lives in areas of the state that have been designated as Dental Health Provider Shortage Areas (DHPSAs). If the number of new dentists graduating from dental

schools does not keep pace with the number of dentists retiring, it is likely that this problem will increase.¹³

Action plan

We can do better:

- ◆ We can prevent oral diseases by providing access to fluoride (through supplements and water fluoridation), dental sealants, and routine dental visits for our children.
- ◆ We can continue to prioritize children's health by maintaining support for New Hampshire Healthy Kids and Medicaid.
- ◆ We can improve access to oral health care by coordinating education, screening and treatment services among physicians, dentists and social service providers.
- ◆ We can remove unhealthy snacks and drinks from our schools.

What can I do?

- ✓ **Join the Watch Your Mouth campaign** by visiting www.watchyourmouth.org, or call 1-866-WYMOUTH (1-866-996-6884) for more information.
- ✓ **Read the Child Advocacy Updates and Alerts and track the progress of this campaign.** (To sign up to receive these e-mails, send an e-mail to childrensalliancenews@childrennh.org and ask to be added to the e-mail list.)
- ✓ **Contact your legislators and let them know you support efforts to improve oral health.** (Hint: Use the Children's Alliance legislative action center to contact your representatives: <http://www.childrennh.org/capwiz.php>.)

To learn more

Visit the Watch Your Mouth website at www.watchyourmouth.org, or call 1-866-WYMOUTH (1-866-996-6884) for more information.

References

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⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000. Executive Summary.

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⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Improving Oral Health: Preventing Unnecessary Disease Among All Americans. www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/oh

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Improving Oral Health: Preventing Unnecessary Disease Among All Americans. www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/oh

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¹⁰ New Hampshire Oral Health Data, 2003. New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. June, 2004.

¹¹ New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Community Health Services, Rural Health and Primary Care Unit, Oral Health Program; Concord, NH. New Hampshire Oral Health Data, 2003. Page 26.

¹² Children: Kenney, G.M. et.al., Gaps in Prevention and Treatment: Dental Care for Low Income Children. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, B-15, April 2000.

¹³ New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Community Health Services, Rural Health and Primary Care Unit; Concord, NH.