

ORAL HEALTH IMPROVING FOR MOST AMERICANS

Tooth Decay Among Preschoolers on the Rise

Editor's note: The following information is provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Americans of all ages continue to experience improvements in their oral health. However, tooth decay in primary (baby) teeth increased among children aged 2 to 5 years, according to a report released in April by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Based on data from CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, the report, *Trends in Oral Health Status—United States, 1988–1994 and 1999–2004*, represents the most comprehensive assessment of oral health data available for the U.S. population to date.

Tooth decay in primary (baby) teeth of children aged 2 to 5 years increased from 24 percent to 28 percent between 1988-1994 and 1999-2004.

The report noted significant improvements in several areas. The prevalence of tooth decay in permanent teeth decreased for children, teens, and adults. And more than one-third (38 percent) of children and teens aged 12 to 19 years had dental sealants, a plastic coating applied to teeth that protects against decay.

The report noted several racial/ethnic disparities. Thirty-one percent of Mexican American children aged 6 to 11 years had experienced decay in their permanent teeth, compared with 19 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

“This report shows that while we are continuing to make strides in prevention of tooth decay, this disease clearly remains a problem for some racial and ethnic groups, many of whom have more treated and untreated tooth decay compared with other groups,” said Dr. Bruce A. Dye, a dentist and the report's lead author.

There were also disparities along economic lines. Three times as many children aged 6-11 (12 percent) from families with incomes below the federal poverty line had untreated tooth decay, compared with children from families with incomes above the poverty line (4 percent).

“Although preventive measures, such as dental sealants, have been widely available for years, we need to focus our efforts on reaching children living in poverty who stand to benefit the most from them,” says Dr. William R. Maas, a dentist and director, of CDC's Division of Oral Health. “This report challenges us to increase our efforts to reach those most in need with effective preventive measures, and to provide guidance and health education to others, for instance, smokers whose oral health can greatly benefit from quitting.”

Other findings of the report include:

- The prevalence of tooth decay in the permanent teeth of youths aged 6 to 11 years decreased from approximately 25 percent to 21 percent, and among adolescents aged 12 to 19 years decreased from 68 percent to 59 percent.
- The use of dental sealants increased from 22 percent to 30 percent among youths aged 6 to 11 years and from 18 percent to 38 percent among adolescents aged 12 to 19 years.
- Moderate and severe periodontitis (gum disease) decreased from 10 percent to 5 percent among adults aged 20 to 64 years and from 27 percent to 17 percent for seniors aged 65 years and older.
- Among seniors aged 65 years and older, the percentage with complete tooth loss (edentulism) decreased from 34 percent to 27 percent.
- Among adults aged 20 to 64 years, 60 percent reported having a dental visit in the past year during 1999–2004, compared with 66 percent reporting a visit in the past year during the previous survey (1988–1994).