

Key Oral Health Messages:

Messages and talking points for use with policymakers, stakeholders, and the public.

IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HEALTH TO OVERALL HEALTH

Good oral health is critical to good overall health and while tooth decay and other dental diseases can have long lasting impacts on long-term health and employability, tens of millions of Americans go without needed dental care because they can't find a dentist, can't afford care, lack dental insurance, or are unaware of the importance of dental care.

Supporting messages:

- Untreated tooth decay and gum disease are linked to serious health problems, including premature births in pregnant women, failure to thrive, and chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.
- Dental symptoms like cavities and abscesses, which to some may seem routine, can cause more serious problems and even lead to death if timely treatment is not received.
- Oral health is more than just brushing and flossing your teeth. Tooth decay is a contagious bacterial infection and cavities are a symptom. Tooth decay is often established by preschool, can be passed on from parent to child, and can lead to serious, sometimes life-threatening infections in the body.

SERIOUSNESS OF THE PROBLEM

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among children in America, and while it is totally preventable, children often end up in the hospital as a result of untreated pain and infection.

Supporting messages:

- Each year, half of all children enter kindergarten with tooth decay.
- A child is five times more likely to seek emergency room treatment for dental problems than for asthma, often because they can't access a dentist, are uninsured, or can't afford routine care.
- Forty percent of uninsured children in this country have never been to the dentist.
- Although twice as many Americans lack dental insurance as lack health insurance, access to dental care is not viewed as being as critical as access to health care and it is often overlooked.

COSTS TO SOCIETY

The costs of untreated dental disease are enormous both in terms of health spending and lost productivity. Tens of millions of adults and children go without needed dental care because they can't access a dentist, can't afford care, or don't have insurance. As a result, they suffer needless pain, endure untreated infections, and miss school or work.

Supporting messages:

- Dental problems in this country are so rampant that more than half of new military recruits enlisted in 2008 had to delay deployment into service because of their poor oral health.
- Adults and children suffering from problems related to tooth decay turn to expensive hospital emergency rooms when they can't access dental care. In 2007, California spent \$55 million for more than 83,000 ER visits for children and adults for preventable dental conditions.
- Adults with dental disease face challenges that impair their productivity and well-being. They suffer in pain, have a hard time getting or keeping a job, and have to take time off from work because they have a toothache or other serious oral health problems.

IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN PREVENTION

Improving access to dental care and investing in prevention pays off in the long term. There are steps we can all take to improve oral health.

Supporting messages:

- Prevention is critical to stopping a lifetime of dental decay and other health problems. Health care providers should refer children to their first dental visit by age one.
- Preventive care begins well before kindergarten. Children who see a dentist in their first year of life have dental costs that are 40 percent lower than children who receive their first preventive visit after age one. They are also less likely to develop potentially painful and serious health problems later in life.
- Children from families with low income are especially susceptible. Those with public insurance like Medicaid are much less likely than those with private insurance to see the dentist, often because they can't find a dentist in their community who will accept public insurance.
- Oral health is critical to overall health. Fifty percent of children show evidence of tooth decay by the time they enter kindergarten. Health professionals and child care providers can educate parents on how poor oral health can impact children's overall health.
- State health officials can focus resources on programs that educate parents about oral health and what they can do to keep their children healthy. Parents need to know that tooth decay is an infectious condition that can be passed on from mother to child. The bacteria that cause cavities are transferred through saliva from mother/caretaker to child by simple routine activities, like sharing of spoons and cups, testing food temperature, and licking pacifiers.

These messages are brought to you by the following organizations: Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors, Children's Dental Health Project, Maryland Office of Oral Health, Michigan Oral Health Coalition, National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, Oral Health America, Oral Health Kansas, Virginia Oral Health Coalition.