

## *Early Childhood Decay in South Carolina – A Fact Sheet*

### **What is early childhood decay?**

“Early childhood decay” is the term used to describe tooth decay in any child younger than six years of age. “Nursing decay”, “baby bottle tooth decay” and “tooth decay” are other terms used to refer to the same problem. The most common symptoms include white spots on the teeth and early development of cavities, which can be very painful if left untreated.

Early childhood decay can have a long-term negative impact on a child’s health. Children who have untreated decay early in childhood can be more susceptible to decay at later points in their growth and during adulthood. The condition is very painful, and surgery to repair damaged permanent teeth may be necessary. Early childhood decay can also limit a child’s ability to eat, communicate, and do well in school.

- ✓ In the United States, 28% of preschool age children have experienced early childhood caries.
- ✓ In South Carolina, 52% of children younger than eight years of age have experienced tooth decay.
- ✓ Economically disadvantaged children are significantly more likely to have experienced early tooth decay than children from a stable financial background.

### **Who gets early childhood decay and how can it be prevented?**

Early childhood decay are caused by bacteria transmitted to the child, much like the flu or other diseases by parents or caregivers. These bacteria live in the mouth, eating sugars and carbohydrates, creating an acid that slowly eats away at teeth. Early childhood decay can be prevented by good early oral health care using fluoride. Children who have limited access to routine dental care, either because there is no dentist in their town or because they cannot afford to pay for it, are at high risk for early childhood decay.

Approximately 430,000 children in South Carolina (42% of the under-18 population) live below 200% of the federal poverty level and are at high risk for oral disease due to untreated decay. Dental services for children are provided as part of the required Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) paid for by SCHIP (State Children’s Health Insurance Plan, an expansion of Medicaid).

#### Good early mouth care includes:

- ✓ brushing or flossing
- ✓ early treatment with fluoride
- ✓ dental sealants
- ✓ not letting a child fall asleep with something in his or her mouth
- ✓ regular visits with a dental care provider
- ✓ limiting sugary juices and snacks in the child’s diet
- ✓ dental varnish

## What is South Carolina doing to prevent early childhood decay?

**Oral Health Promotion:** The Oral Health Division and its partners conduct promotional campaigns, particularly in South Carolina counties with the greatest burden of oral disease. The campaigns are designed to raise public awareness on the importance of improving oral health. This includes a first birthday card sent from dentists to children enrolled in EPSDT, reminding their parents or primary caregivers that it's time for their first dental checkup.

**Education and Training:** Developed through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Oral Health Division has educational materials for infants through early elementary age children. In addition to these resources, there are general information materials designed to inform parents and caregivers how to maintain and promote good oral health. These are distributed on an ongoing basis.

The **Oral Health 101 Training** is a state approved continuing education course for childcare providers. For information on attending upcoming trainings, please contact the DHEC Division of Oral Health.

### Strategies for South Carolina's Future

- ✓ Increase public awareness of the dangers of early childhood caries
- ✓ Continue educating medical providers to do oral assessments on young children
- ✓ Encourage compliance with national recommendations for early childhood dental visits beginning at the first birthday

For more information on early childhood decay:

[http://www.ada.org/public/topics/decay\\_childhood.asp](http://www.ada.org/public/topics/decay_childhood.asp) (the American Dental Association)

[http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/medicaid5/trainings/oral\\_health\\_training/pdf/nevada\\_brochure\\_for\\_wisconsin.pdf](http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/medicaid5/trainings/oral_health_training/pdf/nevada_brochure_for_wisconsin.pdf)

<http://www.jyi.org/research/re.php?id=717>

<http://www.dhec.sc.gov/health/mch/oral/index.htm>

Or contact:

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control  
Division of Oral Health  
1751 Calhoun St  
Columbia, SC, 29201

#### References

Promoting Awareness, Preventing Pain: Facts on Early Childhood Caries (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (2004). National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center. Georgetown University, Washington, DC.  
<http://www.dhec.sc.gov>  
<http://www.muschealth.com/gs/healthtopic.aspx?action=showpage&pageid=P01844>