

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Nations and states pay attention to the well-being of children with good reason – they are tomorrow’s communities and tomorrow’s economy. Anything that derails significant numbers of children from leading healthy, productive lives demands the attention of all of us. Today the most common childhood disease – five times more common than asthma – is tooth decay. A growing body of scientific research demonstrates that dental disease has profound effects on a child’s ability to grow and learn, and because oral health is essential to overall health, this disease is suspected to contribute to adult health problems such as heart and respiratory diseases. The good news is that we can improve children’s oral health through preventive treatments such as sealants, fluoride supplements, and fluoridated water.

It has been five years since the nation’s oral health was first spotlighted when the Surgeon General published *Oral Health in America*. Since that time, many states have put in place the steps and solutions recommended in that report, such as integrating oral health into general medical care and improving access to oral health services.

The simple fact is that children can’t be healthy without good oral health. Kids who suffer from tooth decay and other oral diseases have difficulty eating, sleeping and learning. Nationally, it is estimated that kids miss 51 million hours of school each year due to oral diseases, which may translate into poor educational outcomes and ultimately poor job performance. Kids with poor oral health are more likely to suffer significant pain, experience speech problems, and have difficulty eating, which can result in poor nutrition and a failure to thrive. This affects their ability to become the healthy productive citizens on whom New Hampshire depends.

Over half of New Hampshire’s third grade students have experienced tooth decay, while less than half of our residents are served by fluoridated municipal water systems. Over one fourth of New Hampshire’s children lack dental insurance, which could limit their access to the routine examinations, dental sealants or fluoride supplements that could protect them against decay. Leaving so many children unprotected against disease is a problem for our state, now and in the future.

New Hampshire has taken some important steps in addressing our children's oral health, including the creation of a roadmap to good oral health – the ***New Hampshire Oral Health Plan***. The groundwork has been done, experts have reviewed the options, so now it's time to roll up our sleeves and get going. There is more for us to do if we are to ensure that New Hampshire's children get off to a healthy start, and are protected from dental disease. Fortunately, the solutions are clear and attainable.

- ❖ 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 prevent oral disease by providing fluoride (through supplements and water fluoridation) and sealants (plastic coatings that seal the pits and grooves of molar teeth).
- ❖ We can remove unhealthy snacks and drinks from our schools.

If we work together, we can overcome the problems that affect our children's oral health, because oral diseases are largely preventable. We can make sure that we provide care for our children's teeth as we do for the rest of their bodies. We can mobilize our communities to ensure that we sustain funding for valuable programs like NH Healthy Kids and Medicaid. As adults, we can Watch Our Mouths and use them to speak up for children's oral health!

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