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“Smile Survey” shows oral health successes, challenges in Washington

Untreated tooth decay down, sealants level, and overall decay still high

OLYMPIA — The tooth decay rate for Washington children in 2010 remains as high as it was in 2005, newly tabulated results from the 2010 “Smile Survey” show. Untreated decay is at an all-time low.

The rates for sealants, an important preventive measure to prevent tooth decay, have remained the same overall since 2005. A significant increase in sealants was noted among children from racial and ethnic minorities from 2005 to 2010.

The [Smile Survey](http://doh.wa.gov/cfh/oralhealth/docs/datapubs/SmileSurvey.pdf) (doh.wa.gov/cfh/oralhealth/docs/datapubs/SmileSurvey.pdf) is conducted every five years to monitor children’s oral health. Dental disease can lead to pain, infection, growth and development problems, and poor school performance.

“This is a preventable problem that can affect a child’s entire life,” said Washington State Health Officer Dr. Maxine Hayes, a pediatrician. “The survey shows successes, and remaining needs.”

During the 2009-2010 academic year, low-income preschoolers from 48 Head Start-Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program sites, along with kindergarteners and third-graders from 53 public elementary schools, were surveyed. Results from about 7,500 children show Washington has had some success in children’s oral health – but some challenges remain:

- Children from low-income families were more likely to have more decay, rampant decay, and treatment needs than those from families with higher incomes. Following income, Hispanic ethnicity or being from a family that spoke a language other than English at home (especially Spanish) were the next strongest predictors for having more decay, rampant decay, and treatment needs.
- Rates of untreated decay are at their lowest ever for Head Start-ECEAP preschoolers and public school third-graders in 2010.
- Sealant rates didn’t change overall from 2005 to 2010, but rose significantly for children from racial and ethnic minority groups, especially those speaking Spanish at home.
- Compared to the national Healthy People 2020 Objectives, Washington still has statistically significantly higher rates of decay for preschoolers and third-graders. Washington successfully met national objectives for untreated decay and sealant rates.

Tooth decay is the single most common chronic disease in children, five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. Left untreated, tooth decay can lead to health problems including difficulty speaking, chewing, and swallowing; increased cost of care; loss of self-esteem; needless pain; and lost work and school days. Dental problems may also affect children's ability to concentrate at school.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend water fluoridation and school sealant programs as effective, evidence-based preventive measures that are able to reach all children, regardless of income level. Such measures still aren't used to the greatest extent possible in Washington. More than half of Washington school-age children don't have sealants and many don't have access to fluoridated water.

Smile Survey results help to recognize and better understand children's oral health needs, as well as to inform and guide programs and policies to ensure children receive the prevention and dental care they need. The goal is to increase families' awareness of the importance of preventing dental disease.

The Department of Health Oral Health Program works through public-private partnerships to promote oral health awareness, to support preventive measures for dental diseases, and to help improve access to dental care. Local coalitions bring together community partners interested in promoting oral health. The Washington State Oral Health Plan 2009-2014 provides several strategies to address the needs raised by the 2010 Smile Survey, according to Dr. Joseli Alves-Dunkerson, manager of the Washington State Oral Health Program.