

Improving the Dental Health of Connecticut's Youngest Children

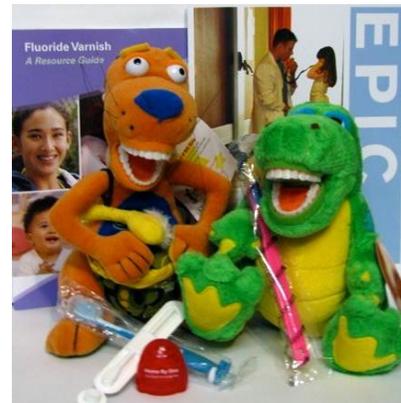
February is National Children's Dental Health Awareness month and an important time to remember that oral health is an essential part of overall health in young children. Dental caries (decay) is an infectious disease that can lead to pain, tooth loss, abscess, and septicemia. Dental health has implications for speech, language and nutrition in children. Recent studies highlight the magnitude of dental problems in children:

- *Almost 25% of children ages 4 and younger in the US have dental caries in primary teeth;*
- *According to the [CT Department of Public Health](#), one in five Connecticut preschool children (ages 2-5) have untreated tooth decay, and;*
- *By age eight and nine: 35% of white children, 50% of African American and Asian children and 63% of Hispanic children in Connecticut have experienced dental decay.*

Early dental services can prevent and treat the first signs of decay but very few young children see a dentist before their third birthday. Although they regularly receive pediatric primary care, few of these providers are trained to provide oral health services. To compound the problem, there is a shortage of pediatric dentists and adult dentists are often not comfortable caring for young children. The good news is that this is changing.

In 2008, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended that primary care providers offer dental services beginning in infancy. Connecticut took steps to help pediatricians implement this recommendation. In 2008, the Department of Social Services approved Medicaid reimbursement for primary care physicians who provide early preventive dental care and fluoride varnish applications for children younger than three. A federal grant is helping fund Connecticut's efforts to connect children to dental providers beginning at age one and train primary care practices to provide oral health care.

The Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut ([CHDI](#)) offers dental service training for primary care practices. CHDI's [Oral Health Module](#) of its [EPIC](#) program provides free onsite instruction for performing mouth exams, preventive counseling and fluoride varnish applications for children younger than three. The one-hour presentation also includes billing guidance and resources on connecting children to dental services in their local community. Participating practices receive lunch and a free fluoride varnish kit with a toothed-puppet, toothbrushes and other materials. The Department of Social Services has accredited the EPIC Oral Health Module as satisfying training requirements for eligibility to receive reimbursement.



Efforts to improve the oral health of Connecticut's youngest children are working.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health recently completed a five-year initiative, called [Home by One](#), to expand the capacity of dentists and train primary child health providers in dental care. Results showed that by the end of 2010:

- *More than 9,400 children younger than three in Connecticut received dental services; including more than 2,000 of them from their primary care provider.*
- *There were 262 pediatric primary care providers certified to provide dental services to children younger than three in Connecticut.*

The numbers continue to grow with more pediatric primary care providers integrating oral health care into their practice.

For more information, or to arrange a CHDI EPIC presentation, contact Maggy Morales at mamorales@uchc.edu or sign up online at: [EPIC Oral Health](#). CHDI provides EPIC presentations on multiple topics including: *Autism Spectrum Disorders, Behavioral Health Screening, Children's Behavior Problems: Brief Office Interventions, Connecting Children to Behavioral Health Services, Developmental Surveillance and Help Me Grow, Care Coordination in the Medical Home, Hearing Loss, Teen Driver Safety, Collaborative Health Care: From Vision to Practice, and Family-Professional Partnerships in the Medical Home.*

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