

## Importance of dental care for children

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among children in the United States. While some may think that dental care and hygiene for children aren't important because kids don't have their "adult teeth" yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Tooth decay can have a serious -- and sometimes permanent -- effect on a child's development and overall health:

- Tooth decay can result in pain and infection, sometimes requiring costly treatments and surgery that require time off from school.
- Children with tooth decay may lack confidence about their appearance and may be embarrassed to speak or smile in the presence of other people. This can have a negative impact on a child's social and speech development.
- Tooth decay can make it painful for children to chew food and get the nutrition that their growing bodies need.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dental Association recommend that parents and caregivers take babies for their first dental visit by the time they turn one or when they get their first tooth. Dentists and hygienists can examine the baby's mouth to check for possible problems and can teach parents and caregivers how to provide good oral hygiene.

Another thing to consider is that healthy habits are often best learned when we are young. If a child grows up in a household that encourages good oral health habits, such as regular flossing and brushing after each meal, he or she is likely to continue these habits into adulthood. Seeing siblings and parents brush and floss sets a great example for little ones, too.

Faith communities have a role to play in encouraging children to care for their teeth. Parish nurses and other pastoral care providers can provide information to families with children about dental care. Community members who supervise children's activities can encourage parents and children to send along toothbrushes and toothpaste so that kids can brush after snacks or meals. After all, children's oral health matters.

*Dear God, we thank you for the communities in which we have conversations, share meals and support each other. Remind us to guard and cherish these relationships. Amen.*

## The importance of dental care for adults

Good oral hygiene and seeing a dentist regularly shouldn't be an afterthought. Gum disease and tooth decay can have a serious impact on your appearance as well as your health. If you're the sort of person who sees their physician for regular checkups but neglects oral health, consider the following:

- Poor oral hygiene can lead to tooth decay, staining, gum disease and bad breath. All of these can have a negative impact on your social and professional life.
- Untreated gum disease and tooth decay can result in bacteria entering your bloodstream and may play a role in the development of some diseases, including cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's disease and osteoporosis. There is also some evidence that gum disease in pregnant women may be linked with premature birth.
- Neglecting tooth decay or gum problems can result in the need for more serious treatments later on. If you have to have surgery or undergo multiple treatments, you may have to take time off work and pay for what your insurance does not cover.

If you are putting off a visit to the dentist because you've had bad experiences in the past or are concerned about costs, here are some options:

- Ask friends and family for recommendations to dentists and check out online review sites. When you make an appointment, explain that you've had bad experiences and would appreciate it if the dentist or hygienist talks you through the procedures before performing them.
- Many dentists offer special pricing or payment plans for new or uninsured patients. Ask about costs when you make an appointment.
- Dental schools often provide low-cost dental care to people who are in need.

If you are concerned with helping others receive the dental care that they need, consider working with your faith community to help provide this care. People in your congregation may need rides to the dentist, for example.

Government programs like food stamps/SNAP, WIC or the food commodities program do not provide oral health products, such as toothpaste, floss and toothbrushes. In light of this, consider a congregational drive to purchase these items to distribute to those in your area who need them.

**Resources:** [Advocate Health Care: advocatehealth.com](http://advocatehealth.com), [American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry: mychildrensteeth.org](http://mychildrensteeth.org), [American Dental Association: ada.org](http://ada.org)