February is National Children’s Dental Health Month: Promoting Perinatal Oral Health

The *Improving Perinatal and Infant Oral Health Project*, a joint effort of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and Children’s Dental Health Project, promotes the oral health of pregnant women and children, and works to increase public awareness of the importance of perinatal and infant oral health. Children’s Dental Health Month in February is an ideal time to share key messages about the importance of oral health for these populations.

Although tooth decay remains the most common, chronic childhood disease, it is overwhelmingly preventable. Dental caries, the disease that leads to cavities, is a preventable, transmissible, and chronic condition. If the disease is left untreated, it is progressive and can be transmitted from caregiver to child. However, dental caries is preventable, and manageable once acquired, with the right actions and behaviors. Promoting the oral health of pregnant women and children right from the start is the best defense against ongoing, disruptive, and costly care.

Promoting the oral health of pregnant women is important for several key reasons. Oral health is a key component of overall health and wellbeing for women across the lifespan, and good oral health during pregnancy allows women to enter delivery in optimal health. While oral health is integral to overall health, a mother’s oral health status is also important in its relationship to the health of her child. This is manifested in several key ways.

- Pregnancy is an opportune time to educate women on proper oral health behaviors, nutrition, and hygiene, both for themselves and their children.

- Transmission of caries-causing bacteria from mother-to-child is the primary vehicle through which children first acquire the disease that causes cavities. The healthier the mother’s mouth, and the longer the initial transmission of bacteria is delayed, the more likely children are to establish and maintain good oral health.

- Studies show an association between periodontal disease and adverse birth outcomes, such as low birth weight, preterm birth, and gestational diabetes. While more research is pending to confirm these associations, the safety and importance of oral health care for the woman herself remains a key factor in achieving overall health and wellbeing.

Treatment for dental disease is safe during pregnancy; however many women do not access oral health care before, during, or after pregnancy. Key barriers include a lack of awareness of the importance of oral health care during pregnancy on the part of consumers as well as providers who are responsible for providing care and referrals. For these reasons, in 2006 the New York State Department of Health convened an expert panel to develop the only state practice guidelines for prenatal, oral health, and child care professionals on oral health care during pregnancy and early childhood. In 2008 the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, in collaboration with Children’s Dental Health Project, the New York State Department of Health, and the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, developed an abridged version of this document for prenatal and oral health providers, available at: [http://www.cdhp.org/](http://www.cdhp.org/). The document serves as a user-friendly reference for prenatal and oral health care providers in providing treatment and referrals to care for pregnant women. The document includes a referral form as well as information on safety of care and guidance for providing treatment at various stages of pregnancy. There is also an accompanying issue brief produced by the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center on the importance of perinatal and infant oral health, that identifies opportunities to educate health professionals who work with women about the importance of oral health.
To achieve oral health during pregnancy, awareness must be raised among providers, policymakers, and the public. Key messages to these audiences include:

- Educating providers on the safety and importance of dental care during pregnancy, and encouraging referrals to care when necessary. The New York State *Oral Health Care During Pregnancy and Early Childhood Practice Guidelines* are a comprehensive resource for prenatal and oral health care providers on the safety of care, providing treatment during various stages of pregnancy, and arranging referrals and coordination of care among providers.
- Promoting the preventable and infectious nature of dental caries to the public at large to increase their knowledge and actions in preventing dental disease, and to encourage women to access care before, during, and after pregnancy.
- Educating policymakers on the importance of adequate public and private insurance coverage for oral health care for women throughout the perinatal period.

Additionally, promoting prevention as the most effective route to achieving oral health for children and families includes:

- Ensuring that children, especially those at greatest risk for dental disease, visit the dentist by age one as recommended by the AAPD, and establish a dental home as a source of comprehensive care in an ongoing relationship between provider and patient.
- Ensuring that children have access to preventive measures such as sealants (often offered in schools), fluoridated water and/or fluoride supplements, and access to oral health professionals for regular screenings and treatment.
- Educating families, health care providers, child care providers and others that come in contact with young children about dental caries – including how to prevent the disease and manage it after onset.

During Children’s Dental Health Month and throughout the year, please join us in our efforts to prevent the most chronic disease of childhood in the U.S., and to connect families to the education and services they need to be healthy, happy, and productive.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) is the membership organization representing the specialty of pediatric dentistry. AAPD advocates policies, guidelines, and programs that promote optimal oral health and oral health care for children. Children’s Dental Health Project (CDHP) is a national non-profit organization with the vision of achieving equity in children’s oral health. CDHP works to eliminate barriers to preventing dental disease to ensure that all children reach their full potential.

For more information on CDHP (www.cdhp.org) and AAPD’s (www.aapd.org) *Improving Perinatal and Infant Oral Health Project*, or for more resources or information, please contact:

**Jessie Buerlein, MSW**  
Project Manager, *Improving Perinatal and Infant Oral Health*  
Children’s Dental Health Project  
2001 L Street, Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
jbuerlein@cdhp.org  
(202)833-8288 x 208