

Report: Widespread tooth decay found among Oregon children

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Every day 5,000 Oregon school children -- the equivalent of one child in every classroom throughout the state -- are in need of urgent care due to pain and infection from tooth decay. For many, their suffering will only worsen because they don't have regular access to a dentist. The Oregon Smile Survey 2007, released last week by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), contains the results of oral screenings conducted among first, second and third graders. It follows a similar study conducted five years ago. "This new report shows that, by every measure, oral health among Oregon's children has deteriorated," said Gordon Empey, D.M.D., M.P.H., dental health consultant in the DHS Public Health Division. "Since the 2002 survey, the proportion of school children with untreated decay has increased by 49 percent." Survey findings include: • More than one in three children needed dental treatment the day they were screened. • Nearly two of every three children surveyed already had experienced tooth decay and, of those, half had untreated decay. • An estimated 27 percent of Oregon's children had not seen a dentist in the previous year. • Fewer than half of Oregon's third-graders have sealants -- a simple, safe, effective and low-cost method for preventing tooth decay. Disparities also exist among Oregon's children. Those living outside the Portland metropolitan area suffer from poorer oral health; children without dental insurance and lower-income children have poorer oral health and less access to care. One aspect of children's oral health has improved since the previous survey -- racial and ethnic disparities are easing somewhat. However, that is partly because the oral health of all Oregon children has worsened, the report says. "Poor oral health can affect many aspects of a child's life -- self-esteem, school success, nutrition and general health," Empey said. "Increasing evidence shows oral health problems can increase the risk of serious medical problems for the rest of a person's life. Meanwhile, the reality is that cavities are 100 percent preventable." Empey added that there is no single solution to improving the oral health of Oregon's children. "The oral health system is broken," he said. "Fixing it will require mutual efforts that involve individuals, health care providers and the community." The report lays out five strategies that focus on public-private partnerships, and cites four community-based measures as effective in reducing tooth decay -- community water fluoridation, early-childhood cavity prevention programs, school-based fluoride supplement programs and school-based dental sealant programs.

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