



Children can't be healthy without good oral health!

Our state is known for its history of firsts: we had the nation's first public school system, the first constitution and the first public health department. However, when it comes to the simple issue of children's oral health, the Commonwealth has fallen far behind. *We can do something about this.* When communities work together to make children's oral health a statewide priority, kids gain access to much needed services and prevention.

It has been five years since the U.S. Surgeon General released the first-ever Surgeon General's report on Oral Health in the United States. In this report, he concluded that oral health is a critical part of overall health – yet Massachusetts still has a long way to go to catch up on our children's oral health. Today, thousands of children in the Commonwealth still suffer from **the most common chronic childhood disease: dental decay**. It doesn't have to be this way; solutions exist and Massachusetts citizens are banding together to see that they are enacted.

We know how to prevent and treat this disease.

Dental decay is a disease caused by a bacterial infection in the mouth. It's five times more common than asthma and has been associated with an increased risk for future tooth decay, as well as other health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.¹ To maintain good oral health, children need access to preventive measures such as dental sealants (plastic coatings that seal the pits and grooves of molar teeth), fluoride (through oral treatments and water) and regular visits to an oral health professional for exams and cleanings. They also need access to treatment services that can stop the progression of decay. Unfortunately, thousands of kids can't get these basic preventive health services because there isn't an oral health professional to provide them in their community.

¹ Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2004). *Oral Health and the Commonwealth's Most Vulnerable Children: A State of Decay.*

Massachusetts can do better than this.

The result of our inattention to this childhood disease is both costly and predictable. Here in Massachusetts, a recent survey found that *nearly half of all 3rd graders in the Commonwealth had a history of dental decay*. Of even more concern is that one quarter of all children in our state are currently living with decay and infections that require immediate care.² The implications of untreated dental decay are serious and can be permanent. Tooth decay in kids can affect some of their most basic activities in life, like speaking, eating and learning. A child with dental problems will have trouble paying attention in class and keeping up with peers in schoolwork. Fortunately, *dental decay is almost entirely preventable*.

Here's what can be done to ensure a healthy future for Massachusetts and its children.

Preventive measures such as dental sealants, fluoride treatments and early childhood screenings are all very effective methods to prevent dental disease in children. By supporting physicians and other health professionals' ability to provide early childhood dental screenings, these important services can be rolled in to a visit to the doctor's office or the health center.

Community water fluoridation is another safe and inexpensive preventive measure that can easily be added to public water supplies. Fluoride keeps tooth enamel strong and is highly effective in preventing dental decay and infection. With an average cost of \$.50 per person per year, water fluoridation also saves millions in dental treatment and insurance costs.

Join other adults who are using their voices to speak up for children's oral health.

We know that the results of not receiving timely preventive and treatment services are dramatic and can be devastating to overall health. We also know by making sure that all kids in the Commonwealth have preventative treatments available to them in their communities we will have healthier and more productive kids. So, let's Watch Our Mouths, Massachusetts, and use them to make history again by asking our legislators to ensure that the widespread problem of childhood dental disease is a thing of the past!

For more information on the Watch Your Mouth Massachusetts campaign and ways to get your community involved, please contact Kate Vaughan at Health Care For All at 617.275.2919 or by e-mail at vaughan@hcfama.org. You can also check out our website at: www.watchyourmouth.org

² Oral Health Collaborative of Massachusetts (2004). *The Massachusetts Oral Health Report*.