



## Children can't be healthy without good oral health!

### Fact Sheet on Kids' Oral Health

It's been five years since the release of the first-ever Surgeon General's report on Oral Health in the United States. This report 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. **Childhood dental decay can hinder kids' ability to learn and advance in school. It also affects some of the most basic activities in life like speaking and eating.**

A few facts about dental decay:

- Dental decay is the most common chronic childhood disease<sup>1</sup>; fortunately *it is almost entirely preventable*.
- Dental decay is a bacterial infection that is five times more common than asthma and has been associated with an increased risk for future tooth problems, heart disease and diabetes.<sup>2</sup>
- Nationally, children miss more than 51 million school hours each year due to dental disease.<sup>3</sup>
- To maintain good oral health, kids need access to preventive measures such as dental sealants (plastic coatings that seal the pits and grooves of molar teeth), fluoride (from toothpaste and in the water supply) and regular visits to a dental professional for exams, cleanings, and professionally applied fluoride treatments.

### We can make a difference

When communities work together to make children's oral health a statewide priority, kids gain access to much needed services. Here are some easy solutions to childhood dental disease:

- Community water fluoridation is a safe and effective preventive measure that can easily be added to public water supplies. Fluoride keeps tooth enamel strong and prevents tooth decay and the serious problems that occur with dental infections.
- With an average cost of \$.50 per person per year, water fluoridation also saves millions in dental treatment and insurance costs.<sup>4</sup>
- Preventive measures such as dental sealants, fluoride treatments and early childhood screenings are all very effective methods to prevent dental disease in children.
- Doctors and other health professionals can provide early childhood dental screenings. Supporting these efforts means these important services can be rolled into a visit to the doctor's office or health center.

## The state of oral health in the Commonwealth

Massachusetts, known for its long history of innovation in public health and education, falls far behind other states in the nation when it comes to the simple issue of children's oral health.

- A recent survey found that nearly half of all third graders in the Commonwealth had a history of dental decay. More significantly, one quarter of these kids were at school with untreated tooth decay and severe infections that required immediate care.<sup>5</sup>
- Nearly 25% of communities in Massachusetts do not have a practicing dentist.<sup>6</sup> This means thousands of kids can't get the basic health services needed to prevent dental decay because there isn't an oral health professional to provide them in their community.
- Nearly 40% of residents in our state do not have access to optimally fluoridated water from their community water supply<sup>7</sup>

## Massachusetts can do better than this

Many other states have already taken action to ensure that all their children have access to dental care. Massachusetts can learn from their successes in ensuring that all children in the Commonwealth have the oral health care they need. We can look to states such as *Connecticut* and *Minnesota* to see that community water fluoridation is a simple and inexpensive way to make preventive dental care accessible to all. We can look to *Ohio*, to see that partnerships between public schools and Departments of Health can make dental sealants easily available to kids. We can look to *Maine* to see that having a school oral health program can provide access to fluoride and dental screenings for school age kids. Not only are children in these schools staying healthy, they are also more likely to be able to concentrate and progress in school!

We know that dental decay is preventable and we have the technology to prevent it, so let's watch our mouths, Massachusetts, and use them to speak up for kids' oral health in the Commonwealth!

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000, Chapter 4, page 63.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000, Chapter 4, page 63.; Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2004). *Oral Health and the Commonwealth's Most Vulnerable Children: A State of Decay*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000. Executive Summary, page 2.

<sup>4</sup> *The Massachusetts Oral Health Report* (2005). Oral Health Collaborative of Massachusetts, pg. 19

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2004). *Oral Health and the Commonwealth's Most Vulnerable Children: A State of Decay*. Page 13

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Oral Health Report (2005). Oral Health Collaborative of Massachusetts, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> *The Massachusetts Oral Health Report* (2005). Oral Health Collaborative of Massachusetts, pg. 17

***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](mailto:vaughan@hcfama.org). You can also check out our website at: [www.watchyourmouth.org](http://www.watchyourmouth.org)***