

Report Shows That New York Can Do More For Children's Dental Health

While most of New York's children have good dental health, many low-income children suffer from poor dental health. A new study from The Pew Center on the States rated how well states are doing at providing children with good dental care. The Cost of Delay: State Dental Policies Fail One in Five Children gave New York a "C." The report ranks states on eight benchmarks in the areas of prevention, public insurance, and workforce and data analysis.

According to the measures in the report, New York has a fluoridation rate of 72.9%, and falls short on the national community water fluoridation goal of 75%. Data used for the report indicates that just under 34% of Medicaid children receive dental care, short of the national average of 38%.

Good dental health is so important for children because the health of the mouth cannot be separated from the health of the rest of the body. Poor oral health can affect a child's growth and development, can impact school attendance and can lead to medical complications when disease is untreated. It is particularly hard for children when the acute pain of untreated decay interferes with learning and being able to play and make friends. Children with missing or painful teeth can also suffer from inadequate nutrition which can impair cognitive development.

In 2000, a landmark report of the Surgeon General called dental disease the "silent epidemic." According to that report, dental caries (tooth decay) is the single most common chronic childhood disease – 5 times more common than asthma and 7 times more common than hay fever. According to the New York State Department of Health, more than 50% of 3rd grade children have tooth decay and more than 1/3 have untreated disease.

There are significant oral health disparities in children by race, income, and subgroup, such as individuals with disabilities, the homeless, migrant families and the uninsured.

- Children from low-incomes families have a higher prevalence of dental caries, higher frequency of untreated disease and lower utilization of preventive

services.

- Twenty- five percent of children and adolescents – typically the most vulnerable – experience 80% of all dental decay occurring in permanent teeth.
- Early childhood caries affects as many as 11% of Head Start children and it costs more than \$3000 to treat each child.
- Children from families with low incomes have nearly 12 times the restricted-activity days (e.g. days for missed school) because of dental problems as children from families with higher incomes.

The fact is, most dental disease is preventable. Frequent feeding, sugary foods and the transmission of bacteria from mothers to children through practices such as tasting an infant's food can lead to early childhood caries. Lack of fluoride, frequent snacking and inadequate preventive care (such as tooth brushing) increase the risk in older children.

Both Medicaid and Child Health Plus cover dental visits for children in New York but many children with private insurance lack coverage. Even for children in public programs, access can be a problem because of a lack of providers, transportation or language barriers. Finding a provider can be trickier for children with special health care needs who often have complex oral and medical conditions that require a specialist.

The good news is that New York has made progress in the indicators used by PEW even as the report was written. New York State Medicaid now reimburses for fluoride varnish treatments and a greater share of Medicaid-enrolled children are getting dental care. But it is not enough. More must be done to increase the number of school-based dental programs and the number of communities with water fluoridation. Medicaid managed care plans and the providers must improve the number of Medicaid children receiving dental exams and preventive care each year.

The full report is available at the [Pew Center on the States website](#). SCAA also has a [report on children's oral health](#) and the New York State Oral Health Coalition has a [report on early childhood caries](#).