



## Proper dental care: Americans shouldn't brush it off

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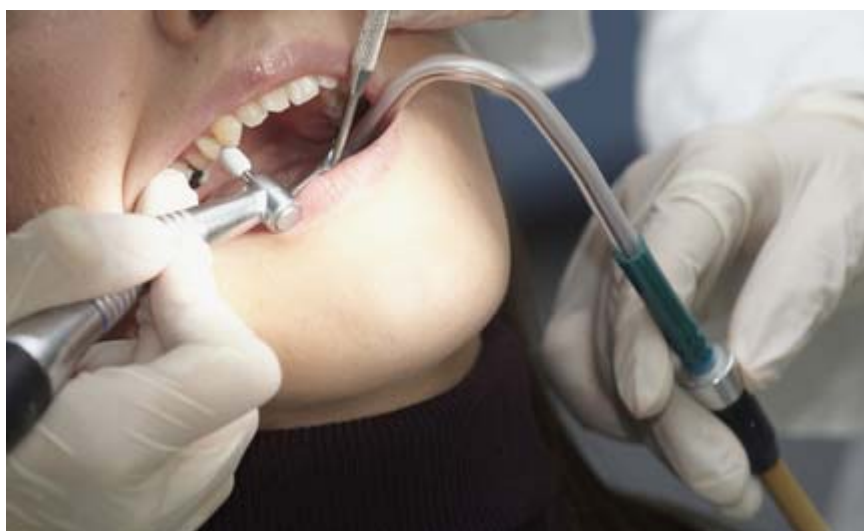


**Patriot-News Op-Ed**

What is the most common chronic childhood illness in America today? Most people answer asthma.

Wrong. It's tooth decay, an illness that is five times more common than asthma.

Today, more than a fourth of all children from ages 2 to 5 and half of those ages 12 to 15 are affected by tooth decay, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Dental health is critical for children.

As a dentist, you would expect me to advocate for dental health, but this is a cause that goes beyond dentists' offices. More and more scientific evidence is emerging that confirms how vital dental health is to overall childhood wellness.

In a new study, researchers at the University at Buffalo in New York looked at 65 children, ages 2 to 5, who were treated for cavities in baby teeth. They found that nearly 28 percent of those children had a body-mass index indicating they were overweight or obese.

The findings have implications for the dental office. "The main point of the findings is that poor nutrition may link obesity to tooth decay. Thus the dental office may be an ideal place to educate families about nutrition

and the risks of obesity and dental decay,” says Dr. Kathleen Bethin, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University at Buffalo and director of pediatric endocrinology and diabetes at Women’s and Children’s Hospital of Buffalo.

As a dentist and corporate dental director for United Concordia Dental, I already know that untreated cavities in children can have many bad effects — infection and pain — and can result in gum disease and poor dental health that follows them into adulthood.

I also know that having healthy teeth and gums isn’t only an issue for children. There’s plenty of research out there that shows a link between oral health and other medical conditions in adults such as premature births, heart disease and stroke, diabetes and more.

For example, a five-year study conducted at the University of North Carolina states that pregnant women with gum disease are seven times more likely to deliver a premature low-birth-weight baby.

Another study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that risk for heart disease among people with gum disease is nearly three times higher than those without it.

And according to “Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General 2000,” the relationship between type I and type II diabetes and periodontal disease has often been called the “sixth complication” of diabetes.

There’s a link between mind and mouth, too.

Self-image and self-esteem can be affected by oral health conditions such as chronic pain, cold sores, bad breath and more. These conditions can interfere with daily activities — work, school and social interactions — and might result in lost productivity, chronic stress and depression.

At United Concordia Dental, we stress overall oral health, and we also understand that a healthy smile increases one’s self esteem and self confidence.

Today, more than a third of American adults have periodontitis while about half have the less-severe gingivitis, which is the mildest form of gum disease. Add to this the fact that 125 million Americans do not have dental insurance according to the National Association of Dental Plans, and it’s clear why, at United Concordia, we take the oral health of our eight million members seriously.

Our goal is to help children and their parents understand the importance of proper dental care.

Toward that end, we are promoting a dental exam and oral health counseling by pediatricians at the first well-baby visit after the appearance of a child’s first tooth. Giving children and their parents such an early start will go a long way toward building good habits and preventing future disease.

**Jerome Blum is a dentist and corporate dental director of United Concordia Dental.**

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