



Affordable Care Act (ACA):

Why Oral Health is Important for Children with Special Needs & How to Access It

Parents of children with special needs may have so many doctors' appointments that it can be easy to forget about preventive and wellness care. It can be especially difficult to focus on dental care. However, oral health is as important as physical health and, if untreated, oral health problems can result in serious complications.

Importance of Good Dental Care

Did you know that, by age eleven, 50% of children have tooth decay? Untreated cavities allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream. In 2007, there was a tragic case of a 12-year-old boy who died from an untreated toothache (see <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Dental/story?id=2925584&page=1>.) Children with special health care needs may have more difficulty obtaining good dental care than other children, since their health condition may affect motor skills involved in everyday tooth care, their medications may affect their teeth, or their behaviors may make visits to the dentist more challenging.



Finding Dental Coverage

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) includes dental coverage for children as an "essential health benefit." In some plans dental care is included with overall medical coverage, and there are also "stand-alone" plans. Parents can find out if dental coverage is in their plan at www.healthcare.gov/find-premium-estimates/. Families can also find a separate dental plan at www.healthcare.gov/dental-plan-information/. The Children's Dental Health Project and Families USA have developed a new guide, "Buying Children's Dental Coverage Through the Marketplace," which is available at www.statereform.org/system/files/buying_childrens_dental_coverage_through_the_marketplace.pdf. Medicaid also provides dental coverage as part of the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit, and a referral to a dentist is required for every child consistent with the periodicity table set by each state. See www.medicaid.gov/Medicaid-CHIP-Program-Information/By-Topics/Benefits/Dental-Care.html. There are also organizations that provide free or reduced-cost dental care, see www.nidcr.nih.gov/oralhealth/popularpublications/findinglowcostdentalcare/.

For the Uninsured

Although some families may have missed the deadline to purchase private insurance through the health insurance exchange/marketplace for this year, eligible children may enroll in Medicaid or CHIP at any time, or a family may qualify for a special enrollment period. This can be checked at www.healthcare.gov/how-can-i-get-coverage-outside-of-open-enrollment/#part=2. Even if families can't get health insurance coverage, they still may be able to get help to pay for dental care. Federally qualified health centers must provide dental care and can be found at http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/Search_HCC.aspx. There is also the National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics at www.nafcclinics.org. Donated Dental Services can help to identify dentists who provide free care, some even in schools or through house calls. Also through this program, states host free dental-care days each year. For eligibility requirements and to find a program, see <http://dentallifeline.org/about-us/our-programs/#Bridge-Campaign-of-Concern>. In addition, Smile for a Lifetime offers free orthodontia. Information about this program is available at <http://slf.memberclicks.net/zip-code-search>.

Partnering with Oral Health Professionals

Families need to let their child's dentist know about factors that influence oral health. This can include medications, restrictions (e.g., no fluoride), information on their child's skills, and/or behavioral factors. Families can also ask their dental providers what serious signs and symptoms to watch for, such as fever, headache, pain, or swelling that might indicate dental problems. Pediatric dentists can recommend great tools for maintaining good oral care, such as electric toothbrushes which can help with motor skills (some even play pop tunes), floss (dinosaur-shaped flossers for kids), or other aids, like plaque remover, fluoride rinse, or mouthwash.

Parents should try to help their children maintain good oral health habits, which might mean remembering to bring special oral care supplies (such as orthodontic appliances) to the hospital when a child is admitted. Parents may have to catch up on routine dental appointments when hospitalizations or other health crises have passed.

Parents of children with disabilities want the best care for their children. This includes oral health - an important component of overall health!

This tip sheet was authored by Lauren Agoratus, M.A. Lauren is the parent of a child with multiple disabilities who serves as the Coordinator for Family Voices-NJ and as the southern coordinator in her the New Jersey Family-to-Family Health Information Center, both housed at the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) at www.spanadvocacy.org.

More of Lauren's tips about the ACA can be found on the website of the Family Voices National Center for Family/Professional Partnerships: <http://www.fv-ncfpp.org/>.

RESOURCES

Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health—Pocket Guide

<http://www.mchoralhealth.org/pocket.html>

Dental Tool Kit - Autism Speaks

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/dental-tool-kit>

Oral Health - American Academy of Pediatrics

English:

<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/healthy-living/oral-health/Pages/default.aspx>

Spanish:

<http://www.healthychildren.org/spanish/healthy-living/oral-health/paginas/default.aspx>

Oral Health - Maternal/Child Health Knowledge Path

<http://www.mchoralhealth.org/>

Oral Health Tips - Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/kennedy_files/OralHealthTips.pdf