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New efforts try to prevent cavities in Whatcom County kids

KIE RELYEA / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

New initiatives have been launched to curb cavities in young children in Whatcom County, including teaching pregnant women about the importance of their own oral health in protecting their babies.

The efforts focus on prevention by increasing education and access to health care early in the life of a child.

"It's getting them even earlier down the pipeline," said Maggi Kriger, coordinator of the Access to Baby and Child Dentistry Program as well as the Oral Health Coalition in Whatcom County.

The initiatives entail:

- Adding 180 lower-income children to the Access to Baby and Child Dentistry Program, which is often referred to as ABCD, and stresses preventive care, beginning with a child's first teeth.
- Making oral health a normal part of prenatal care.

Why the push locally?

Dental disease is the No. 1 chronic disease of childhood. It's five times more common than asthma, Kriger said. And good oral health is essential to good overall health. "The body doesn't distinguish the difference," she said.

New research shows a link between tooth and gum disease and diabetes, heart disease and stroke, according to the Oral Health Coalition, which is a public-private partnership in Whatcom County.

Plus, children who are in pain because of poor oral health find it difficult to concentrate in school, according to the Washington Dental Service Foundation.

A new report from the Pew Center on the States noted that dental care was the greatest unmet need for children in terms of health care. In that same report, the Pew Center discussed how Washington state was addressing that need through the ABCD Program, which works to increase access to dental care for low-income children from birth through age 5 who have medical coverage through Medicaid.

The program began in Whatcom County in 2000, and at least 7,307 children have been enrolled since then. Nineteen dentists in private practice and community health centers provide care to children through ABCD.

Chris Piper is among those caring for children through the program. As a pediatric dentist, it becomes very obvious (there is) the need for dental health in the low-income population," the Bellingham dentist said.

"We see a lot of children with severe dental decay that otherwise would not be treated in the proper manner."



The Whatcom County Health Department oversees ABCD, and its expansion here is being done in collaboration with the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access. A \$75,000 grant from the Washington Dental Service Foundation is paying for the effort.

The alliance will talk to lower-income families it signs up for a state insurance program. Many of them don't realize dental care is part of the coverage provided, according to Lara Welker, program manager of the alliance.

In keeping with the ABCD program, the alliance also will talk to parents about the importance of getting their children in early to the dentist to prevent dental disease.

Health care providers say it's important that a baby get an oral health screening when the first teeth come in, usually between the ages of 6 months and 1 year. That education seems to be needed.

A recently released survey conducted by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry found that 97 percent of moms who responded didn't know their children needed to go to a dentist in the first year of life.

As for pregnant women, the additional oral health focus as part of prenatal care is needed because the bacteria that causes dental disease can be passed to the child, according to the Oral Health Coalition. A mother's poor dental health could harm her growing baby and increase medical complications, according to the coalition.

Plus, pregnancy is a good time to talk to women about oral health.

"Women are so eager for information about what's going to keep their children healthier, they're really motivated right then," Kriger said.

TEE TH TIPS

- Go to happyteeth.org to learn about oral health initiatives by the Whatcom County Oral Health Coalition and to get tips on dental care for infants and toddlers, older children and adults.
- See also kidsoralhealth.org.
- Whatcom Alliance for Health Care Access (WAHA) is at whatcomalliance.org.

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