



## MEDIA RELEASE

### **Tooth Decay on Increase in Babies and Young Children**

*(May 8, 2007)* Your baby's cries crescendo into screams and you realize you're into another sleepless night. You think it must be the pain of teething causing the discomfort, but it may be that she or he actually has one or more cavities in the first tiny baby teeth that have emerged.

"Right now, throughout North America, we're seeing a marked increase in cavities in children under five, some of them as young as 15 months," said Dr. Leonard Smith, a Calgary pediatric dentist who is president of the Alberta Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

Smith cited results issued by the Centre of Disease Control that noted a 15.2% rise in early childhood caries in the most recent four years documented, and added the Canadian trend is similar. The cause is more elusive. "We don't know why yet; you would think with all the knowledge and preventive advice available, this shouldn't be happening."

He suspects that busy parents don't always take the time to get the information or practice preventive care, or that they don't see it as important. He said that parents need to know that care of the teeth and gums is as important as having a medical checkup, and the consequences of neglecting a child's oral health can be severe.

Infections of any sort, including gum disease or an abscessed tooth, can cause fever, rashes and other symptoms, as well as leave the immune system compromised. And cavities, which can be treated simply in adults and older children with a visit to the dentist, can mean major surgery under anesthetic for a baby or small child.

"If your child has an unhealthy mouth, you will have an unhealthy child," said Smith, a member of the Alberta Dental Association + College. "Oral disease is one of the few health problems that is entirely preventable for no cost; all it takes is awareness and daily care."

Preventive care includes wiping the gums with a washcloth or q-tip after each feeding to get rid of residue milk or pureed food. When the teeth start to erupt into the mouth, which begins at about six months, a parent or caregiver must remove the dental plaque (bacteria, food, cells) from all five surfaces of each tooth. If the teeth have no space between them and are touching, those teeth need to be flossed.

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Dr. Sarah Hulland, a Calgary pediatric dentist who is president of the Canadian Academy of Pediatric Dentists and a member of the Alberta Dental Association + College, suspects that sugary liquids may be one of the main culprits in the rise in caries. “Fruit juice has a high concentration of sugars and should be avoided. Repetitive feeding at will can also cause problems – even milk has sugars – frequent feeding not only leaves too much residue, it can lead to childhood obesity as the child doesn’t learn to be satisfied.”

And though milk, especially breast milk, is good for a baby, it does not provide enough nutritional balance after age one. Introducing health solid foods helps build healthy teeth. Here again there are some foods to avoid: processed food, ketchup, white bread, cheap wieners, cheese strings (a piece off a cheese block is good) and dried fruit (fresh is better).

Hulland has seen some horror stories in her practice, like parents who put soda pop in baby bottles. “They say they do it because ‘my child likes it’ but parents are the ones who teach a child what to like. No matter what we advocate as dentists, everything will fall apart if we don’t change the attitude at home.”

Both the Canadian Dental Association and the Canadian Academy of Pediatric Dentists have endorsed a standard of care that advocates preventive care from birth and a first dental visit after six months and before their first birthday. “Why so young?” said Hulland. “Because that is a key time for parents to receive information on oral health and early enough to stop any disease that’s forming before it becomes a major problem.”

Both national organizations, along with the Alberta Dental Association + College, are actively promoting oral health and are looking at partnerships with doctors, public health nurses, day care workers and other people who work with children to help them spread the word.

Though the highest levels of oral disease are found among the poor, new immigrants and First Nations communities, poor oral health in children crosses all social strata. Failure to treat oral health problems in children can be considered a form of neglect that could be reported to social services, but Smith advocates education over punishment.

““We are trying to educate parents at all levels of society, said Smith. “Everyone wants the best of care for their children, so we are hoping our messages will be heard and that the alarming increase in cavities and oral disease in babies and young children declines.”

For further information on oral health for young children, talk to your dentist, go to the Alberta Dental Association + College website [www.abda.ab.ca](http://www.abda.ab.ca) or ask your public health nurse or regional health authority for a copy of the booklet: *A Parent’s Guide to Healthy Teeth for Children Birth to Six Years*.

**Media contact:**

Kimberly Carriere, Director of Communications, Marketing + Member Services  
Alberta Dental Association + College, Phone: (780) 432-1012 or toll free 1-800-843-3848

## **Backgrounder: ORAL HEALTH FOR CHILDREN UNDER SIX**

Preventive care should begin after the baby's first feeding and continue for life. Until a child is age eight, they do not have the dexterity to remove all plaque from all surfaces of each tooth, so a parent or caregiver must help to brush and floss.

### **Primary teeth primary to overall health**

Some people think primary (baby) teeth aren't very important but they are vital to the child's overall health. Here are four reasons:

1. Primary teeth aid the first steps of digestion. They allow the child to properly chew their food. The small particles are exposed to digestive enzymes in saliva, which when swallowed into the stomach allow the nutrients to begin their absorption.
2. Primary teeth aid in speech and articulation. Certain sounds, like *th*, require the tongue to contact the upper incisors, while other sounds, like *ch*, require the lower lip to touch the upper incisors.
3. Primary teeth act to guide the eruption of the permanent teeth as well as maintain the inherited space for the permanent teeth. Some primary teeth remain in the child's mouth until they are 12-13 years of age!
4. Primary teeth contribute to the child's positive self esteem by providing the radiant smile that each child deserves!

### **Even natural sugars can cause tooth decay**

Teeth begin forming under the gums before birth. Pregnant women who eat a balanced diet help their unborn children take the first step toward good oral health.

Decay occurs only when there are teeth in the mouth, when there are specific bacteria present on the teeth surface, and when there is food for the bacteria to digest. This food is usually a type of sugar which forms a waste product called lactic acid when processed by the bacteria. If this acid is allowed to accumulate on the tooth surface, it will dissolve the dental enamel, allowing the bacteria to invade deeper into the tooth structure and continue the dissolution of the tooth.

This process can occur as early as nine months of age. It initially affects the upper front teeth but quickly spreads to the other teeth when the baby is allowed to feed through a bottle that contains juice, milk, soda pop or other foods that contain sugar, or when they are breast feed and allowed to feed all night or whenever they are want to feed.

If the food residue is not totally removed from all five surfaces of each tooth every day, the teeth that are exposed have a high probability of becoming decayed.

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### **Visiting the Dentist**

Parents should take their child for a first visit to the dentists after six months of age and before their first birthday. This visit helps to educate parents on how to maintain their child's oral health and in some cases, may also detect early signs of trouble while they are still easy to treat.

Most fear of dentists is instilled by parent to child; parents should be matter-of-fact about the visit or let the child form his or her own opinion. "If we see a child early and their experience is positive, fear is not an issue," said Dr. Smith. "We spend a lot of time with each child, explain what we want to do and ask their permission before we do it. They have the right to know and consent, and when that right is given, they are cooperative."

Many people have expectations that dental insurance should cover everything but it usually doesn't. That should not stop parents from ensuring that children get the oral health treatment they need. "Some parents agree to treatment only to the maximum of their plan," said Smith. "It is important to consider the needs of the individual, not the coverage in the plan. Ignoring oral health can result in a sickly child and no one wants that."

### **Accidents can happen**

Dental damage and injuries are common in active children. Taking your child to a dentist right away any time a tooth is injured can help prevent tooth loss. Damage under the gums may not be visible. If a permanent tooth is knocked out, rinse it in cool water and put it in milk. Then take the tooth and your child to the dentist immediately. If the accident occurs after hours, call the dentist's emergency number.

### **Oral Health for Special Needs Children**

Parents of children with health problems, developmental disabilities or other special needs should be particularly vigilant about their child's oral health. Absorbed with the child's medical needs, they may neglect care of the teeth and gums, try to avoid giving their child further discomfort through daily oral care and visits to the dentist, or overcompensate for the child's condition by giving them too many sweets. It is even more crucial to give a special needs child oral care as their overall health is more apt to be compromised by an oral infection or other dental problem.

### **Media contact:**

Kimberly Carriere  
Communications, Marketing + Member Services  
Alberta Dental Association + College  
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