

Colorado aims to increase youth dental health

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Nearly half as many Colorado kindergartners and third-graders have untreated tooth decay than in 2003, according to a recent survey.

While the greatest gains in reducing tooth decay came from children in low-income households, these children still are twice as likely as children from higher-income households to suffer the pain and poor academic performance that often stems from untreated tooth decay.

“We’ve made good progress during the past decade,” Dr. Katya Mauritson, oral health director at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, said. “But too many kids with limited access to dental care are still at risk for toothaches, missed school days and long-term health problems.”

According to the 2011-12 Children’s Oral Health Basic Screening Survey, 48 percent fewer kindergarten and 46 percent fewer third-grade students have untreated decay than did nearly a decade ago.

The percentage of low-income kindergarten students with untreated tooth decay or fillings declined from 73 percent in 2003-04 to 53 percent in 2011-12, while their peers from higher-income households saw a decline from 35 percent to 23 percent during that same time period.

Despite the decline, more than half of low-income Colorado kindergartners and nearly one of four from higher-income households have untreated cavities. Mostly preventable dental treatments cost Coloradans more than \$1 billion per year.

Oral health is one of Colorado’s 10 winnable battles. The department’s Oral Health Unit has been actively working with public and private partners, dentists and hygienists across Colorado to improve oral health through increased community water fluoridation, age 1 dental visits and access to dental sealants. The oral health Winnable Battle goals include the following:

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—Increase to 75 percent or more the percentage of Coloradans served by community water systems receiving optimally fluoridated water to prevent 18 to 40 percent of cavities. Baseline from 2012 is 72.4 percent.

—Increase to 50 percent the percentage of Colorado third-graders who have dental sealants on permanent molars. Baseline from 2011 is 45 percent.

—Increase to 12 percent the proportion of Colorado infants who get a dental checkup by age 1. Baseline from 2011 is 9.3 percent.

“Good oral health is a priority for Colorado,” said Dr. Chris Urbina, executive director and chief medical officer at the department. “We must ensure all Coloradans, regardless of where they live or how much money they earn, have access to quality dental health services.”

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