



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Good oral health for children begins earlier than age 3

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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During February, National Children's Dental Health Month, the Alabama Department of Public Health advises parents that a child's first dental visit should be at age 1 rather than at age 3.

Recent scientific findings have more clearly established tooth decay as an infectious disease process. Bacteria in the mouth that cause tooth decay are actually passed from the mother (or caregiver) to the child in ways such as through sharing eating utensils. The child colonizes these bacteria in his or her mouth at age 2, on average, with eruption of the primary teeth.

As a result, the American Dental Association, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommend that a child's first dental visit be within six months after eruption of the first tooth, but not later than 12 months of age.

For the child who develops many cavities prior to age 3, a first dental visit by age 1 identifies these cavities early. This can prevent more costly and complex dental cases, including those which might require oral surgery. This recommendation is particularly important for low-income children. Nationally, approximately 18 percent of all children aged 24 months to 47 months have tooth decay requiring fillings; among low-income children the figure is 30 percent.

Tooth decay in 3- and 4-year-old Head Start children in sites in Alabama has ranged from 25 percent to 80 percent. Approximately 80 percent of children less than age 3 have seen a physician, while only 15 percent of them have seen a dentist. Thus, primary care pediatric physicians are important partners in screening and referring children for early dental care.

"In the near future, good oral health for a child may begin with the mother," said Dr. Stuart Lockwood, director of the Oral Health Division of the Alabama Department of Public Health. "Studies are being conducted to help moms thought to be at high risk of tooth decay reduce the bacteria in their mouths—either during pregnancy or after delivery. These are bacteria that mom eventually passes to her child. If the bacteria causing tooth decay in the child can be reduced in the mother, the chance that the child will get many cavities can be reduced."

Remember, to maintain good oral health, brush with fluoridated toothpaste, floss, eat healthy snacks and ask a dentist about dental sealants at regular dental visits.

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