

Media Release

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Child oral health in Australian homes

Poor habits and parental confusion setting up Aussie kids for a lifetime of tooth decay

One in three Australian children do not brush their teeth twice a day and one in ten have had at least one decayed tooth pulled out before they turn nine years old, according to new research by The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll.

The RCH National Child Health Poll has uncovered for the first time that one in three preschoolers have never visited a dentist and many well-meaning parents are confused about how best to keep their child's teeth healthy.

Infrequent toothbrushing, few dental visits, especially in toddlers and preschoolers, and a sugar-laden diet are all combining to set children up for a lifetime of poor oral health, the survey of Australian parents reveals.

The latest RCH poll, which was conducted in January, provides new information about how well parents understand how to keep teeth healthy and prevent problems in their children.

The survey of 2073 parents, representing 3992 children, shows:

- One in three (31 per cent) preschoolers have never visited a dentist
- One in three children (33 per cent) overall do not have their teeth cleaned twice a day
- One in 20 preschoolers (5%) is needing to be admitted to hospital because of dental decay
- One in four of all school-aged children (27%), two in five preschoolers (39%) and more than half (58%) of infants and toddlers don't have their teeth brushed twice a day
- One in four (23 per cent) parents believe children only need to see the dentist if they have a problem with their teeth
- More than three quarters (77 per cent) of parents don't know that their children should see a dentist for their first checkup about age 12 months
- Almost half of parents (48 per cent) don't know that tap water, which contains fluoride, is better for teeth than bottled water
- Most parents (85 per cent) do not know the maximum recommended daily intake of added sugar for children
- Half of parents (49%) do not know that there might be free dental services for their child

Australian parents report that one in ten preschoolers and one in three primary school-aged children have needed a filling due to tooth decay. One in ten Australian children are having at least one tooth pulled out as a result of decay before they turn nine years old.

The survey also shows parents are confused about how to keep their children's teeth clean:

- 81 per cent of parents say they are confident they know how to care for their child's teeth yet this study shows they lack basic knowledge about dental care
- Three out of four parents (72%) of infants and toddlers say they have never had any education from a health professional about caring for their child's teeth
- One in four parents (28 per cent) wrongly believe brushing once a day is OK
- One in three parents (33 per cent) do not know that babies need their teeth cleaned every day

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- One in eight (13 per cent) parents believe children only need to brush their teeth if they eat sugary food

However, some health messages are getting through, with 85 per cent of parents knowing that fruit juice is a sugary drink that can cause tooth decay.

Nevertheless, many parents report that their child has sugar-sweetened drinks regularly. One in four children drink sugary drinks most days a week, rising to one in five (21%) preschoolers. One in three teenagers (30%) drink sugar-sweetened drinks four days a week. One in five toddlers and preschoolers are regularly put to bed with a bottle of milk or sugar-sweetened drinks – a practice that is strongly associated with dental decay.

Quotes attributable to Dr Anthea Rhodes, paediatrician and Director, RCH National Child Health Poll

“These results are more concerning than we expected. For the first time, we can see that many parents are confused about what they need to do keep their child’s teeth healthy. Having a healthy mouth isn’t a matter of luck, it’s a matter of habit. Good habits can prevent many common dental problems.”

“Tooth decay is largely preventable, yet rates in young children are rising. Dental disease costs the Australian economy \$9.9billion a year and kids are suffering unnecessarily.”*

“Parents need to be made aware of how to prevent tooth decay in their child from infancy, otherwise we will continue to see this problem get worse.”

“Parents can’t solve this problem on their own. Health care professionals and policy makers need to address the knowledge gap if we are to slow the rates of dental disease.”

“Brush teeth twice a day, visit the dentist at least once a year for checkups from age one and choose a tooth friendly diet, including drinking tap water instead of sugary drinks. These three simple things will help set your child up for a lifetime of good oral health.”

“Children see health workers all the time for all sorts of reasons – we should use these visits as an opportunity to educate parents how to help keep their child’s teeth healthy.”

Data source

The 10th RCH National Child Health Poll was a survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,073 parents of children aged 0-18 years. Collectively, respondents had 3,992 children. The survey was conducted in January 2018 by an independent research agency on behalf of The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

*Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017. Health expenditure Australia 2015–16. Health and welfare expenditure series no. 58. Cat. no. HWE 68. Canberra: AIHW.