

DENTAL HEALTH IN OUR COMMUNITY

In today's complex world, public health is an increasingly vital part of our daily lives. As part of our mission, the Dental Clinic at Peoria City/County Health Department works toward goals to prevent dental disease, promote oral health, and protect the community with a competent workforce.

By analyzing current research and a health needs assessment completed every 5 years for Peoria, community representatives selected poor oral health as a priority dental issue for the Illinois Department of Public Health in 2006. Contributing factors to poor oral health in Peoria County include access to appropriate dental care and poor oral hygiene leading to dental caries, costly restorative procedures, chronic pain, and systemic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory illnesses, diabetes and poor pregnancy outcomes. Children and adults with the poorest oral health tend to be economically disadvantaged, disabled, or members of racial and ethnic minorities. Dental caries or tooth decay remains one of the most common chronic childhood diseases – five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. Children living in poverty suffer twice as much tooth decay as their more affluent peers. Twenty-five percent of children living in poverty have not seen a dentist before entering kindergarten. Uninsured children are less likely than insured children to receive dental care. In Peoria County, 50 % of the children receiving dental exams at public health clinics need follow-up dental care.

Neglected oral health can also lead to adverse physical and economic consequences. Poor oral health can influence the overall health for children and adults, including productivity at the school and at work. Among children in the United States, an estimated 51 million school hours are lost per year because of dental-related illness, resulting in decreased school performance, poor social relationships, and parental time missed from work to care for sick children. Among adults, more than 164 million hours of work are lost each year as a result of oral health problems and dental treatment visits. The economic impact of the direct and indirect costs of dental treatment and related health problems is significant to society as a whole.

Maintaining proper dental health is an integral part of overall health and well-being of individuals and the community. Preventive dental care is the best defense to promote oral health. Targeting health promotion education for parents, children, and the whole community is one method to assure people understand the need for preventive care such as regular exams, dental sealants, and fluoride treatments. In addition, it is important to assure access is available for dental exams and for treatment. Partnering with the dental community to assure these services are available is a goal for the community. To assure preventive dental care in the Peoria area, community representatives are working in partnership to integrate existing community services and provide community based interventions. Some interventions include:

- providing dental exams to children and special needs adults not only in dental offices, but in a variety of non-traditional settings such as during Maternal and Child Health visits or at school sites;

- working with Peoria Dental Society dentists to accept referrals from community clinic exams;
- promoting the first Friday in February as Give Kids a Smile Day by organizing volunteers to provide dental health education and dental treatment of urgent needs to 3700 children at Early Head Start and school-based clinics;
- training local physicians to provide oral exams and fluoride applications during well baby visits at physician offices;
- working collaboratively with the Hult Health Education Center and Heartland Community Health Center to collect and measure outcomes of oral health presentations;
- partnering with PARC and IDPH Oral Health Division to obtain dental health grant funding for projects to increase access to dental services for high risk populations;
- participating in evidence-based interventions with the UIC College of Dentistry and SIU School of Dental Medicine to assure a competent workforce includes medical and nursing students understand clinical dental activities;
- combining community resources of the Peoria Dental Society, Heartland Community Health Clinic, OSF Saint Francis Hospital and the Peoria City/County Health Department to design and implement a General Residency Program to expand dental practices to include a public health aspect.

The good news is that dental disease is preventable. It is estimated that approximately ninety percent of oral health is achieved through what people do for themselves and ten percent is achieved by what is done by the dental team. It is imperative that as a community we understand the importance of including parents, children, employers, and the whole community to make the connection to good oral health behaviors. Creating the setting for education with appropriate dental care services in an easily accessible system can be an achievable goal for our community.

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