

# GOOD DENTAL CARE IS ESSENTIAL FOR ACHIEVING A HEALTHY OHIO

## Ohio's Oral Health is in Decay

Too many Ohioans cannot get affordable dental care in their communities—and the problem is getting worse. Dental care is the number one unmet health need for children and low-income adults in our state.

As a result, too many Ohioans live in pain, miss school or work, and even develop life-threatening infections. Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease—more common than asthma. Left untreated, dental decay can impede learning, social development, and proper nutrition. It can also lead to a lifetime of poor health and increased risk of diabetes, stroke, and heart disease.

All of this could be prevented if dental care was available when and where Ohioans need it.

## Too Many Ohioans Do Not Get Care

There are many reasons Ohioans do not get the dental care they need—high costs, not understanding the importance of good dental care, no access to providers, and more. We have Ohioans in rural counties who have to drive hours to find dental care. We have Ohioans who live just a mile or two from plenty of dental providers but who cannot afford care because of high costs or lack of insurance, or providers do not accept Medicaid patients. We have Ohioans who are worried about putting food on the table and may not understand the health risks that come from a lack of adequate dental care.

For children, lack of dental care is the top unmet health need. Nineteen percent of children lack dental insurance—four times more than the number of children without medical insurance. More than half of Ohio's children experience dental decay by third grade. Almost 340,000 children in Ohio have never been to the dentist.



Adults don't fare much better.

- About 45 percent of adults in Ohio have had one or more permanent teeth removed due to tooth decay or gum disease.
- Nearly 37 percent of Ohio's poorest seniors have had all of their teeth removed.
- More than 3.9 million adults over the age of 18—or 45 percent—do not have dental insurance, three times more than the number of Ohio adults without health insurance.
- Sixty percent of seniors have no dental insurance and most Medicare plans do not cover routine dental care.

## Where You Live May Decrease Your Odds of Getting Care

Where Ohio's general practice dentists decide to set up shop makes a difference in who gets care. Ohio has geographic areas and communities with severe provider shortages. In fact, as of February 2014, Ohio has 84 of them and that number is up from 56 in October of 2009. These areas are geographic and population-based federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) that have high population to dentist ratios. Nearly 1.5 million Ohioans live in these HPSAs.

Counties in southern and southeastern Ohio have the highest concentration of dental shortage areas. Consider that of Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties 27 have been designated county-wide dental shortage areas. Many of these counties have the highest rates of working age-adults with no dental insurance. Children in Appalachian counties disproportionately suffer the consequences of untreated cavities and have a greater need for urgent dental care than children in other counties.

While there are 84 designated dental professional shortage areas, other communities may face dental professional shortages but have not applied for the designation.

## The Oral Health Puzzle

Because the reasons for lack of dental care are many, so are the solutions to increasing access to care. There are many ongoing efforts to increase access to dental sealants for Ohio's children, to educate parents and adults about the importance of dental care, and to increase public awareness of Ohio's dental health care crisis. Other approaches include continued incentives for dentists to practice in underserved areas and expanding the dental team to include mid-level providers like nurse practitioners.

## We Can Fill the Provider Gap in Ohio

One way to improve Ohio's oral health is to expand and modernize the dental care team with new kinds of providers that make it easier for children and families to get quality, affordable, routine dental care where they live. Mid-level providers, called dental therapists, are specially trained in preventive and routine care and can expand the reach of the dental care team. A recent study showed that mid-level dental providers expand access to quality care for hard to reach populations including children enrolled in Medicaid, people living in rural communities, and people with low-incomes.

Working as part of a dentist-led team Dental Therapists can perform preventive care and routine services, allowing dentists to see more patients with complex needs. And, Dental Therapists can practice in communities where there are not enough dentists.

## We Need Your Help!

Please consider lending your organization's name to our growing list of endorsers. Help us put a face on the lack of dental care. Tell us your story or stories of those with whom you work.

For more information or to get involved:



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*UHCAN Ohio is a statewide nonprofit organization working for high quality, accessible, affordable health care for all Ohioans.*

Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs)  
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84 Total Shortage Areas

