

Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General

Oral Diseases Epidemic Among Poor

The Associated Press -- May 25, 2000

By KAREN GULLO WASHINGTON (AP) - From cavities to mouth cancer, a "silent epidemic" of oral diseases afflicts minorities and low-income Americans even as most of the nation benefits from healthier teeth and gums, the U.S. surgeon general said today.

Thanks to fluoridated drinking water and better dental care, most Americans middle-age or younger can expect to keep their teeth for life.

Yet dental diseases still threaten the health of low-income people, who are more likely to lose their teeth, said David Satcher, the nation's top doctor.

**"..80 percent of Medicaid eligible kids don't receive dental care because few dentists take Medicaid."
- Surgeon General**

"Those who suffer the worst oral health are found among the poor of all ages, with poor children and poor older Americans particularly vulnerable," Satcher said in a report. "Members of racial and ethnic minority groups also experience a disproportionate level of oral health problems."

The government's first-ever comprehensive look at oral health in America showed that a combination of social and economic factors - lack of dental insurance, poor diets, tobacco use, a dearth of minority dentists and lack of awareness of the importance of healthy teeth - contribute to poor oral health.

Meanwhile, tooth problems often go unchecked because children lack insurance coverage. Uninsured kids are two-and-a-half times less likely to get dental checkups compared to kids with insurance. Experts estimate that as many as 26 million American children have no insurance coverage for dental care.

Even poor kids who have dental insurance are not getting the care they need, the report said. The government estimates that 80 percent of Medicaid eligible kids don't receive dental care because few dentists take Medicaid patients and dental care isn't a priority for poor families.

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