



**EARLY DENTAL HEALTH STARTER KIT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM**  
**NEBRASKA DHHS OFFICE OF ORAL HEALTH & DENTISTRY**  
(Nov 2020)

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry has stated that tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood illness in the United States- five times more likely than asthma and 20 times more common than diabetes. Children who have poor oral hygiene, with frequent exposure to sugary liquids and sticky foods, have a high risk of suffering from Early Childhood Caries (ECC), which is found throughout the general population and is a significant public health problem.

ECC is an infectious disease that can begin as soon as the baby teeth start to emerge (around 6 months) and can impact a child's quality of life. ECC is initiated by the bacteria present in a child's mouth breaking down carbohydrates that are found in food. This process creates acids that quickly start to destroy the enamel on the teeth resulting in cavities. Decay can start on multiple teeth and if left untreated, can create acute pain and chronic infections. The CDC and Healthy People 2020 report over one-third of U.S. children age 3-5 already have dental decay and in Nebraska the rate is even higher (46%). It is a substantial health concern for rural, low income, minority and special needs children. Without proper dental treatment, this disease can disrupt proper eating and sleeping patterns. It can lead to malnutrition and delays in language development. Each year in the United States more than 51 million school hours are lost due to dental related illness. ECC may require extensive dental treatment (often in a hospital operating room under general anesthesia) that can cost thousands of dollars.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry now recommends that children visit their dentist no later than their first birthday. Proper oral hygiene habits should begin soon after birth by cleaning the infant's gums with a wet gauze pad right after feedings. Baby teeth can be brushed as soon as they erupt with special hygiene aids and the use of fluoridated toothpaste. As the child grows and more teeth come in, different sized toothbrushes can be used. It is very important to start the routine of cleaning teeth for two minutes twice a day...every day!

These Starter Kits are part of a state-wide educational campaign that will partner the UNMC College of Dentistry, the Nebraska Community Foundation and the DHHS Office of Oral Health. The kits are designed for use by rural local health departments to distribute to Birthing Hospitals, Early Head Starts, WIC Centers, Foster Child Sites, Sixpence, Day Cares, Head Starts, Home Visiting Programs and other needed locations. The kits can be demonstrated to parents or caregivers so they can understand that proper oral hygiene is very important for children age 0-6 and that most dental disease can be prevented. The kits come with instruction cards that explain how and at what age each item should be used. The card also emphasizes the need to establish a medical-dental home by age one. Dental Homes establish an ongoing relationship between the patient and the dentist and also provide access to continual dental disease prevention and educational services. Regular dental cleanings, the use of topical fluoride varnish and preventive dental sealants can reduce cavities in children by 40 to 60%. **And remember, it is important to never share toothbrushes and always replace after any illness, particularly any respiratory illness such as COVID-19!**

Educational materials will also be produced to explain the need for this early dental health campaign in Nebraska and to demonstrate the proper use of the Starter Kits. The project goal is to increase awareness in Nebraska about the importance of individual oral hygiene from day one and regularly taking the child to a dentist for proper care. Many parents now wait until their child is older or actually in pain before they visit a dentist. They may not always understand that dental disease can be prevented and the importance of healthy baby teeth for proper eating, talking and growing. By promoting the use of these Starter Kits you can increase healthy outcomes for young children and help keep all of Nebraska smiling! For more information about this unique educational program please contact Jessica Ball [jessica.o.ball@nebraska.gov](mailto:jessica.o.ball@nebraska.gov) #402-471-8594.

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