

# Our Community at Work to Increase **Smile Power**



*Benjamin Franklin said,*  
“It’s easier to prevent bad habits than to break them.”

This old adage is particularly applicable to oral health. Poor dental hygiene can compromise a child’s future so teaching him or her just one simple habit—to brush after breakfast and then again before bed for two minutes each time—will go a long way toward reducing tooth decay. It’s estimated that one in three children is not brushing before bedtime and that one missed brushing each day can lead to a mouthful of trouble down the road.

## Tooth Decay—Most Common Chronic Childhood Disease

According to national statistics from Oral Health in America: A Report from the Surgeon General, “Tooth decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease—five times more common than asthma. An estimated 5 million children have dental disease extensive enough to disrupt their daily lives. Early childhood caries, the most common and aggressive form of early tooth decay, can lead to childhood illness, missed school days and self-esteem issues. Though the number of school-age children has declined in the past 30 years, many children remain at risk,” according to the study.

## Local Response

Here in the Upper Valley, both the 2003 and 2008 United Way Community Needs Assessments identified access to oral health services for underserved children as a major focus. In 2004, Alice Peck Day Hospital created Upper Valley Smiles, an oral health program serving children in Lebanon, Enfield and Canaan elementary schools.

The Coalition for Oral Health Improvement (COHI) was formed in the fall of 2006, to help improve access to dental care for underserved in the Upper Valley. It was convened by leadership of Good Neighbor Health Clinic and Red Logan clinic (a free dental clinic for adults only). Sy Conarck, DDS, was on the Board of Good Neighbor and was the driving force behind the COHI. Their early mission was to increase the pool of volunteer dentists at the Red Logan Clinic and to improve access to dental care for all ages.

## Current Oral Health Projects

Pediatricians at Alice Peck Day and the Children’s Hospital at Dartmouth (CHaD) now include oral exams in their well child clinic visits. Alice Peck Day funds a school-based sealant program. All second and third graders in the Mascoma and Lebanon school districts are offered a free screening by a dental team. Sealants and topical fluoride varnish are available for children lacking a dental home.

Recently, Dartmouth-Hitchcock pediatrician Kimberly Gifford received a grant to develop a curriculum on nutrition and oral health for the Mascoma region. The CHaD Family Center partnered with Dr. Gifford to create an infant oral health flyer. Team members also met with several local groups of young mothers to promote the message of good nutrition and how to protect babies and young children from getting cavities.

## “Celebrating 2 times 2 for Healthy Teeth—Brush Twice a Day for Two Minutes Each!”

Thanks to support of the CHaD Family Center and the Coalition for Oral Health in the Upper Valley, all primary care pediatric patients at CHaD will receive a new toothbrush at their clinic appointment during the week of February 23. They can then pick up a tube of toothpaste at Molly’s Place in the CHaD Family Center. Molly’s place staff will instruct kids on proper brushing techniques by helping them brush Mr. Smiley’s teeth—a dinosaur with large teeth and a large toothbrush. Staff will also distribute New Hampshire’s ten tips for healthy oral health. This effort is part of the community’s observance of February as National Children’s Dental Health Month.

## Habits for a Lifetime of Happy Smiles

In addition to brushing, Dr. Gifford stresses that seeing a dentist regularly and paying attention to what and when you eat are two more essential components of good oral health. According to

the American Dental Association, Americans are consuming food and drinks high in sugar and starches more often and in larger portions than ever before. For many people “junk food” and drinks have replaced nutritious food and beverages. For example, the average teenage boy in the U.S. consumes 81 gallons of soft drink each year. A steady diet of sugary food and drink can ruin teeth, especially for those who snack frequently throughout the day, rather than eating and drinking at specific meal times.

Dr. Gifford explains, “When the teeth are exposed to sugar continuously throughout the day, even in small and often hidden amounts, the harmful effect on teeth can be dramatic. Sugar on teeth provides food for bacteria, which produce acid. The acid in turn can eat away the enamel on the teeth.”

## The Bottom Line for Teeth of all Ages

Here’s a few good tips for keeping those pearly whites strong and healthy for a lifetime:

- ✓ Brush at least twice a day for two minutes each time—once after breakfast and once at bedtime.
- ✓ Floss once a day
- ✓ See your dentist regularly
- ✓ Eat a healthful diet with plenty of calcium
- ✓ Limit sweet or sticky snacks
- ✓ Limit in-between-meals snacking
- ✓ Use sugar-free chewing gums and candies made with xylitol (Xylitol reduces the harmful bacteria in your mouth.)
- ✓ Wear a mouth guard when playing contact sports

If you are interested in finding out more or joining the COHI, please contact Nancy DuMont at Alice Peck Day, 603-443-9548, or email her at dumontn@apdmh.org.