

Oral Health

Oral health refers to the health of teeth, gums, tongue and other parts of the mouth and throat. Poor oral health and untreated oral infections can have a significant impact on overall health and quality of life. Good oral health habits, such as regular brushing, flossing and dental check-ups, are important in preventing cavities, gum disease and other problems. Oral diseases can worsen certain diseases and conditions, or become worse because of certain diseases and conditions. Oral health also can act as an early warning system for people suffering from certain conditions such as:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Osteoporosis
- Obesity

Furthermore, pregnant women who have gum disease are at higher risk of having a premature birth or low birthweight baby than pregnant women without gum disease.

ORAL HEALTH AMONG CHILDREN

The DeKalb County dental program screens children to identify those who need dental care. Children are categorized in one of the following groups based on the type of care they need:

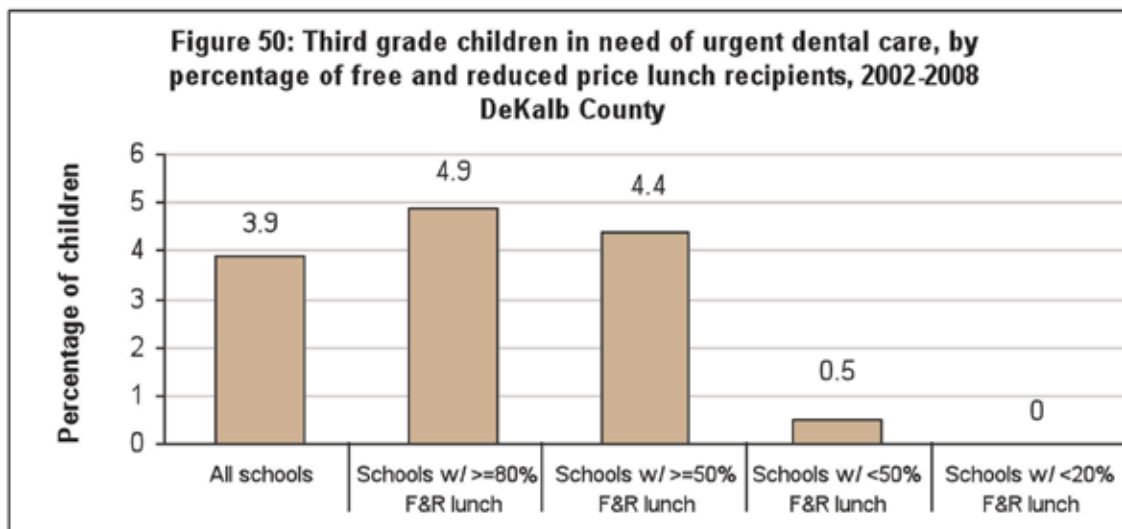
- Regular dental care: There are no obvious problems. The child should visit a dentist every six months for routine check-ups.
- Prompt dental care: The child has cavities or gum problems, but is not complaining of pain. The child should visit a dentist within three months.
- Urgent dental care: The child needs immediate care due to pain, infection or swelling.

Among DeKalb County children who were evaluated between 2002 and 2008:

- 10.8% of third graders needed prompt dental care.
- 3.9% of third graders needed urgent dental care.
- 1.5% of Head Start children aged 2 to 5 years needed urgent dental care.

Children from low-income families are more likely to need urgent dental care and have higher rates of untreated oral diseases than other children. Figure 50 shows that in DeKalb County elementary schools where at least 80 percent of students qualified for the free and reduced price lunch program there was a notably higher percentage of third grade students in need of urgent dental care (4.9%) than in schools with less than 50 percent of children qualifying for free and reduced price lunch (0.5%).





Source: DeKalb County Board of Health, Dental Health Program.

ORAL HEALTH AMONG ADULTS

Like children, adults can experience tooth decay, cavities and gum problems. In addition adults may develop cavities on root surfaces as these areas become exposed to bacteria and carbohydrates due to gum recession (loss of gum tissue).

In 2007:

- 73% of DeKalb County adults visited a dentist or dental clinic, compared to 69% of adults in Georgia in 2006.
- White adults were significantly more likely than black adults to visit a dentist or to have their teeth cleaned in the past year (Table 50).
- Black adults were significantly more likely than white adults to have had teeth removed because of tooth decay or gum disease (Table 50).

Table 50: Dental visits and tooth removal among DeKalb County adults, 2007

	Total	White	Black
Visited a dentist or dental clinic within the past year*	73%	81%	63%
Had their teeth cleaned by a dentist or hygienist in the past year*	71%	80%	61%
Have had one to five permanent teeth removed because of tooth decay or gum disease*	28%	18%	37%

*Difference is statistically significant.

Source: DeKalb Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey.

ORAL CANCER

Oral cancer refers to cancer in the mouth, lips or the part of the throat at the back of the mouth. The biggest risk factor for oral cancer is tobacco use, including smoking and using smokeless (spit or chew) tobacco (see Tables 18 and 19 for information on smoking among DeKalb County youth and adults). People who both drink alcohol and use tobacco increase their risk even more.

Tables 51 and 52 show that between 2002 and 2006 in DeKalb County:

- 302 people were diagnosed with oral cancer.
- The oral cancer rate among DeKalb County males (14.3 per 100,000) was more than double the rate among females (6.7 per 100,000).

	Number	Rate
Total	191	14.3
White	97	15.6
Black	86	14.4

	Number	Rate
Total	111	6.7
White	56	7.1
Black	51	7.7

Source: Georgia Comprehensive Cancer Registry, Georgia Department of Community Health, Division of Public Health.

What may put you or your child at risk

- Practicing poor oral hygiene (not brushing or flossing).
- Not having regular dental check-ups and screenings.
- Consuming sugary foods and drinks.
- Sharing toothbrushes, eating utensils, cups and glasses.
- Tobacco and alcohol use.
- Having a family history of oral health problems.

What you can do

- Avoid smoking and smokeless (spit or chew) tobacco.
- Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss your teeth daily.
- Replace your toothbrush every 3 or 4 months.
- Visit your dentist regularly for cleanings and exams.
- Drink fluoridated water (DeKalb County's public water is fluoridated).
- Brush your baby's gums with a soft cloth and water.
- Take your child for his/her first dental visit after the first tooth appears.

For more information

- American Dental Association: <http://www.ada.org>.
- American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry: <http://www.aapd.org>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/OralHealth>.
- DeKalb County Board of Health, Dental Health Program: <http://www.dekalbhealth.net/HealthServices/DentalHealth.html>.