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## **Smile! It's Children's Dental Health Month**

**Opinion** – by Health Commissioner Harry Chen, MD

In my six years leading the Health Department, by far my favorite activity has been visiting school classrooms. Nothing beats government meetings like being surrounded by a dozen or so bright-eyed, smiling children. What I have learned as a doctor and as health commissioner is that for our children and teens, healthy teeth matter more than you might think. Teeth are meant to last a lifetime, and a healthy smile is important to your child's health, their self-esteem, and even their future as adults.

In our schools, it's not surprising that oral health is closely tied to academic achievement for every Vermont student. Kids who have a toothache or cavity are three times more likely to miss school. A student in pain simply is not able to concentrate in class. In fact, children who reported recent tooth pain were four times more likely to have a low grade-point average compared to those who had no dental pain.

For young adults as well, the challenges go beyond basic health. We live in a society where first impressions count. As we all remember from growing up, judgements can be instant and often long lasting. A healthy set of teeth is key to helping young adults have the self-confidence they will need when meeting new friends at school and college and, importantly, when they walk in the door for that job interview.

Tooth decay is one of the most common chronic diseases in children, but there are many things parents and caregivers can do to help kids have a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums:

- Limit sugary snacks – instead, choose fresh fruit, raw vegetables, cheese and nuts
- Brush with toothpaste that has fluoride and floss each day, especially before bedtime
- Have regular dental check-ups – ask your dentist about dental sealants to protect your children's back teeth from decay
- Choose fresh tap water over sugary drinks, especially if your water has fluoride in it

Drinking fluoridated water is one of the best ways to prevent tooth decay. Fluoride is a mineral that is naturally found in most water supplies. Community water fluoridation is about making sure there is the right amount of fluoride to prevent tooth decay.

Many Vermont cities and towns have had community water fluoridation for more than 60 years. It's safe and effective. We know this from seven decades of evidence-based science. A 2011 study in Alaska found that children living in non-fluoridated areas had a 32 percent higher rate of decayed, missing or filled teeth than did kids in communities with fluoridated water. In 2010, a study demonstrated that drinking fluoridated water as a child meant they were less likely to lose teeth due to decay as an adult 40-50 years later. That's why the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention called community water fluoridation "one of the greatest public health achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century."

Protecting children's dental health means better health outcomes. It also saves money as a community and as individuals. Family budgets can be squeezed by the unexpected cost of an expensive dental treatment, crown or procedure. As taxpayers, we all share in the cost of treatment when we don't adequately invest in far less costly efforts to ensure access to prevention services regardless of income.

So let's celebrate Children's Dental Health Month by recommitting ourselves to teaching our kids how to brush, floss and to take care of those adorable, shiny smiles for the rest of their lives.

For more information about dental health, visit: <http://healthvermont.gov/wellness/oral-health>

For more information about community water fluoridation, read our fact sheet:

[http://healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2017/02/HPDP.Factsheet.Community\\_Water\\_Fluoridation.Feb2017.pdf](http://healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2017/02/HPDP.Factsheet.Community_Water_Fluoridation.Feb2017.pdf)

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