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## **LANDMARK STUDY FINDS CHILDREN'S ORAL HEALTH IN NEED OF REPAIR**

***Of 25 states surveyed, California ranks only above Arkansas in decay***

**Sacramento** – A study released today by the Dental Health Foundation found that by third grade, almost two-thirds of California children have dental disease, making it the most prevalent children's health problem in the state.

"When people think of the diseases affecting children most frequently, they often think of things like obesity or asthma," said David Perry, DDS, Chair of the Dental Health Foundation. "But dental disease is now the single most common chronic disease of childhood, and is seriously impairing the quality of life for thousands of children in California each year. That not only hurts our children, it hurts all of us."

The study, which surveyed more than 21,000 kindergarten and third graders during the 2004-2005 school year, found that more than one-quarter of children screened had untreated dental decay, meaning that as many as 750,000 elementary school children around the state may need dental care. The study also compared California's prevalence of tooth decay on a national scale, finding that out of 25 states surveyed, California ranked second highest in prevalence of tooth decay.

"These untreated dental diseases are more than a minor inconvenience – they cause severe problems for children," said Jared Fine, DDS, MPH, of the Dental Health Administration of Alameda County. "As many as 140,000 elementary school children could be suffering from serious problems including painful infection, abscesses, difficulty speaking and swallowing, trouble concentrating, and missing significant amounts of school."

It has been estimated that school children age five to 17 missed nearly two million school days in a single year nationwide due to dental health problems.

The study also showed that barriers to dental care, including parents' finances or a child's lack of dental insurance, can have a profound impact on children's dental health. About one-third of low income children have untreated decay compared to about one-fifth of higher income children.

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Latino children participating in the survey were at a disproportionately large risk for dental health problems. Seventy-two percent of Latino children surveyed had experienced decay, while 26 percent had rampant decay and 30 percent needed immediate treatment – nearly twice the rates of Caucasian children surveyed.

“This study shows us that dental disease in California is a massive hurdle we need to overcome and it needs to be treated as such,” said Francisco Ramos- Gomez, DDS, MS, MPH, Associate Professor of Pediatric Dentistry at UCSF School of Dentistry. “Monitoring children’s oral health, taking steps to prevent disease, treating problems early, and raising public awareness are key to a healthier tomorrow for our children.”

Unlike many other diseases, dental disease is almost entirely preventable if children and parents start practicing good habits early. By the time children are in kindergarten more than 50 percent already have dental decay, 19 percent have rampant decay and 28 percent have untreated decay. Additionally, of the children surveyed, 17 percent of kindergarteners, and more than five percent of third graders had never been to the dentist, leaving them at a significantly higher risk for decay.

“Tooth decay is a silent epidemic for children ages 0-5,” said Kris Perry, Executive Director of First 5 California. “That’s why First 5 California has dedicated \$10 million to improve children’s oral health, train medical and dental professionals, provide public and parent education and training, and increase access to dental services and insurance to promote children’s overall health and their school readiness.”

To aid in prevention efforts, First 5 California funded the California Dental Association Foundation and the Dental Health Foundation to create “First Smiles,” an Oral Health Education and Training Project. The project targets 40,000 dental and medical professionals across the state, and provides intensive training to an additional 24,000 professionals working with young children and their parents to better prevent, detect and treat dental disease in young children.

The Dental Health Foundation is working to develop a comprehensive approach to help reverse the trends identified in the study and minimize the impact of dental disease on children, their families and the state. This includes developing a comprehensive surveillance system; eliminating barriers to care by increasing access to dental coverage and preventative care; increasing disease prevention techniques including fluoridation and dental sealants; and improving the public health infrastructure to better serve the needs of all California children and families.

On February 28, 2006, the Dental Health Foundation will present the study to the California State Assembly Standing Committee on Health to discuss the results and advocate for increased services for children’s oral health in California. To access the survey, go to [www.dentalhealthfoundation.org](http://www.dentalhealthfoundation.org).

#### **About the Dental Health Foundation**

*The Dental Health Foundation works through community partnerships to promote oral health for all by providing leadership in advocacy, education, and public policy development; promoting community-based prevention strategies; encouraging the integration of oral health and total health; improving access to and the quality of oral health services.*