Dennis Lewis: Sugar attacks oral health

As a dentist who has worked both in private practice and safety net clinics, I've been looking at children's teeth for more than 30 years. And as an oral health advocate and CEO of Dental Aid, a safety-net dental provider serving more than 8,000 patients a year in Boulder County, I continue to see young children with serious oral disease.

Although dental caries, a transmittable and contagious infection which appears as cavities, is almost 100 percent preventable, it remains the most common chronic disease in children; it is five times more common than asthma. Greater rates of decay occur in low-income and minority children. Nearly one in three children in Colorado have untreated tooth decay, and among Latino children, the number is one in two. Poor oral health is the number one health related reason children miss school; 7.8 million hours of school time is lost annually in Colorado. Children's Hospital Colorado serves more than 3,000 children for dental surgery annually. These are children who must receive general anesthesia to receive needed oral health treatment.

Dental caries is a bacterial disease. Bacteria thrive on carbohydrate rich diets, especially sugars. A by-product of bacteria feeding on carbohydrates is acid which erodes the enamel on the surface of the teeth and makes them more vulnerable to tooth decay. Studies have found that after controlling for other potential contributors, dental disease is significantly associated with sugary-sweetened beverage consumption.

In our practice, to help reduce the incidence of oral disease in our patients, we focus on prevention and education regarding good oral hygiene and nutritional practices. We emphasize the importance of drinking water and controlling the amount of sugary beverages consumed.

Anything that helps to reduce the amount of sugar consumed by our patients will help to improve their oral health.

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