



*This blog post is brought to you through a collaboration between Oral Health Ohio and Children's Defense Fund- Ohio. This is the first of a series of blog posts focused on the importance of oral health for maternal and child well-being. To contact Oral Health Ohio, please reach out to Marla Morse at [marla.morse@oralhealthohio.org](mailto:marla.morse@oralhealthohio.org) or visit [www.oralhealthohio.org](http://www.oralhealthohio.org).*

## **ORAL HEALTH IS CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

Today, the state of Ohio has one of the highest rates of infant mortality and incidents of low weight births in the country. There are a number of actions that can be taken to reduce these rates and keep infants and moms healthy through pregnancy and post-partum and addressing maternal oral health is one of them.

### **The importance of oral health on the developing child.**

Poor maternal oral health is correlated with children being born early and at early birth rates. Poor oral health can also exacerbate a woman's chronic conditions, such as diabetes or hypertension.

The oral health of a child begins with the pregnant mother. Research shows that a woman's oral health during pregnancy is correlated and a good predictor of her newborn baby's risk for tooth decay. In fact, mothers can transmit to babies the bacteria that plays the primary role in causing tooth decay. Tooth decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease.

While [4 in 10](#) women show signs of some sort of tooth decay, many pregnant women delay or fail to receive regular dental care and cleanings. One of the most important ways pregnant mothers can help give their child a health start is to make sure that mothers receive regular dental appointments. Referral to a dentist by primary care providers can help ensure that oral health conditions during pregnancy are appropriately addressed. That way a dentist can identify any oral health problems that might exist and appropriately address those problems before becoming more serious.

### **Ohio is taking important steps to protect infant and maternal health**

This summer, the Ohio legislature passed House Bill 11, which accomplishes a number of things that will benefit Ohio's children. This bill is a powerful step forward in our state's fight against infant mortality and push toward safe and healthy outcomes for all mothers and babies. Among other things, the bill does the following:

- (1) requires state employee health care benefit plans, the Medicaid program, and Medicaid managed care organizations to cover certain tobacco cessation medications and services;
- (2) Requires the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) to establish a grant program for the provision of group-based prenatal health care services to pregnant Medicaid recipients residing in areas with high preterm birth rates;
- (3) *Permits the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) to establish a dental program under which pregnant Medicaid recipients may receive two dental cleanings per year; and***
- (4) Requires ODH to create educational materials around lead-based paint and distribute them to families who participate in the Help Me Grow Program and reside in homes built before 1979.

The Ohio Department of Medicaid must establish a dental program providing expectant mothers with two dental cleanings. Under the bill, if ODM establishes such a program, it will provide the following: (1) expectant

mothers will be eligible to receive two dental cleanings per year, (2) priority to recipients residing in areas with higher preterm birth rates; and (3) ODM must market the program to Medicaid recipients. The Legislature and the DeWine Administration has stated repeatedly that infant mortality and maternal health are a priority – especially at a time where we are aware and recognize the significant health disparities that exist along racial lines. A focus on maternal oral health is essential to children’s overall health and well-being.

Ohio’s Medicaid program includes oral health as part of pregnancy-related health coverage, which is particularly important as 50% of births in Ohio are covered by Medicaid. Permitting two dental cleanings per year to expectant moms will allow pregnant mothers to take control of their oral health and potentially improving the health of their baby.

According to recent data from the 2018 Ohio Pregnancy Assessment Survey, only 43% of all pregnant women reported having their teeth cleaned during pregnancy and of those pregnant mothers with an income of \$32,000 or less, only 26% had teeth cleaned during pregnancy. This is despite the fact that almost all of the pregnant women in the survey visited a physician in their first trimester of pregnancy. This data suggests that more can be done to educate primary care physicians and consumers about the importance and safety of oral health during pregnancy. HB 11’s call to establish a dental program in combination with more outreach and education from physician’s offices, will result in more pregnant women in Ohio receiving dental care and ultimately positively impacting the health of our youngest Ohioans.

**While HB 11 is a step in the right direction, primary care providers and OBGYNs should emphasize the importance of oral health for child wellbeing.**

Optimal oral health for pregnant women and children can be achieved through effective communications and [partnerships](#) among families, physicians, and oral health professionals. By elevating the importance of oral health and providing easily digestible information, pregnant women may be more likely to see their dentists during the pregnancy. With HB 11, we are hopeful that these dental offerings will encourage more pregnant women to obtain treatment.

Primary care physicians and OBGYN’s must inform expecting mothers of the importance of oral health on their children. Efforts should be taken to inform health professionals about the connection between oral health and overall health during the pregnancy. Bright Futures: Oral Health established a [pocket guide](#) to provide health care professionals with an overview of preventative oral health strategies and includes information about risk assessment, as well as many other helpful guidelines.

In taking these important steps to improve the health of our women and infants we can continue to reduce the number of babies lost in our state and improve the number of Ohioans who thrive.