



Like a cold, parents can pass decay-causing bacteria to children

Most parents don't know they can pass harmful bacteria from their mouth to their baby's mouth, which can put their child at an increased risk for cavities.

In fact, just over a third of Illinois parents (36 percent) realize they can pass dental disease to their baby. That's one of the key findings from a survey¹ of Illinois children's oral health, conducted on behalf of Delta Dental of Illinois, the state's leading dental benefits provider.

The truth is, much like a cold, bacteria in the mouth that causes tooth decay can be transferred from person to person. Bacteria are passed when items contaminated with saliva go into a child's mouth. Typically, this takes place through natural parental behaviors, such as sharing eating utensils or using one's mouth to clean a baby's pacifier. Research shows that moms – more often than dads or other caregivers – usually inadvertently infect their children.²

Caregiver behavior reflects a lack of knowledge about passing bacteria that can lead to dental disease. More than four in 10 (42 percent) Illinoisans say they sometimes or often share utensils with their children. Caregivers of children ages 2 to 3 are most likely to share utensils with their children.

“Babies are actually born without any harmful bacteria in their mouths. But once bacteria are introduced in the mouth, your child will be more prone to cavities in baby and permanent teeth,” said Dr. Katina Morelli, DDS, dental director for Delta Dental of Illinois. “If a parent has a history of poor oral health with frequent cavities, they are particularly likely to pass the germs along.”

Delta Dental of Illinois offers these tips to help caregivers protect their children's teeth:

- Make sure to keep your own mouth healthy. It's never too late to begin good oral health habits. Maintain a good diet, brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste at least twice a day and floss at least once a day. Visit the dentist regularly and have any cavities in your own teeth repaired.
- Try to cut back on or eliminate saliva-transferring behaviors – such as sharing utensils and toothbrushes, and cleaning off your baby's pacifier with your own mouth.

- Mothers and expecting moms who already chew gum should chew gum sweetened primarily with xylitol. A recent study found that children of moms who chewed xylitol gum (starting in the sixth month of pregnancy) were significantly less likely to have decay-causing bacteria in their saliva.³

If you follow these tips, you can ensure that you will be passing along good oral health habits – not harmful bacteria – to your children. Visit www.MouthMattersIL.com to learn more about good oral health care.

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¹ *Morpace Inc. conducted the 2011 Delta Dental Children's Oral Health Survey. Interviews were conducted by email statewide with 151 primary caregivers of children from birth to age 11. For results based on the total sample of Illinois adults, the margin of error is ±8 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level.*

² *Australian Dental Journal, Factors influencing oral colonization of mutans streptococci in young children, 2007.*

³ *Journal of Dental Research, Xylitol Gum and Maternal Transmission of Mutans Streptococci, January 2010.*