



NCFH

National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.



ORAL HEALTH

Dental disease is one of the most common and preventable ailments in the United States. According to an analysis of migrant health center encounter data in 2007, dental care ranked as one of the top 3 health problems migrant farmworkers were treated for.¹ However, statistics show that a large percentage of migrant farmworkers and their children do not seek regular dental care and suffer from complications linked to dental carries or gum disease. In addition, research has consistently shown that farmworkers of all ages have a level of oral health far worse than what is found in the general population.

General Information

- Lack of regular dental care can result in pain, infection, and delayed diagnosis of oral diseases including periodontal or gingival diseases and oral cancers.^{1a}
- Tooth decay is the most common oral health problems in the United States. More than 40 percent of poor adults 20 years and older have at least one untreated decayed tooth. This is four percent more than financially stable adults.¹ Tooth decay affects more than 90 percent of adults over age 40.² One out of 20 middle-aged adults is missing all of their teeth.³
- As of 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) statistics show that only 66% of the U.S. population receives fluoridated water through the taps in their homes. This means that over 115 million people do not receive the benefits of fluoridated water.⁴
- One in four adults has experienced facial pain in the past six months, which interferes with eating, talking and swallowing.⁵ In addition, oral health problems cause adults to lose more than 164 million hours of work each year.⁶
- In the United States, 30 percent of all children's health expenditures are devoted to dental care.⁷ Among children, tooth decay is five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. 78 percent of 17-year-olds and 50 percent of 12-to-15-year-olds have experienced tooth decay.⁸ More than 50 percent of five-to-nine-year-olds have had at least one cavity or filling. 23 percent of children ages 2 to 11 have never been to a dentist.⁹
- Not having dental insurance is more common than a lack of medical insurance. For every adult age 19 and older without medical insurance, three adults lack dental insurance. There are over 108 million Americans without dental coverage compared to an estimated 46 million without medical coverage.^{9a}
- Destructive periodontal disease occurs in 25% of Mexican American adults as opposed to 20% of Whites.^{9b}
- In the United States, 31% of all adults 18 years and older reported that they had not seen a dentist in the last year. This rate is higher among Hispanics, 40% of Hispanic adults reported not seeing a dentist within the last year.^{9c} Hispanic adults are less likely to have visited a dentist within the past five years than White and African American adults.¹⁰
- According to the Center for Disease Control National Oral Health Surveillance System 22% of Hispanics 65 years or older have lost all of their teeth.^{10a} While 47% of Hispanics 65 years or older have lost 6 or more teeth.^{10b}

- A national survey found that employed Hispanic adults were twice as likely to have untreated dental caries as Whites.^{10c}
- More Hispanic children have never been to a dentist when compared with White and African American children.¹¹
- Health centers' capacity to provide dental care is limited by costs of dental equipment, inability to recruit and retain dental care providers, and insufficient revenues to support dental care.¹² Only 12.5% of the over 16 million people who used health centers received center-based dental care in 2007.^{12a}

Farmworker Data

- Migrant and seasonal farmworkers, a medically underserved population that have little access to dental care are likely part of the “silent epidemic” of oral health problems affecting vulnerable populations.¹³ A 2007 study found that 80 percent of farmworkers had not received dental services within the past year. Of those who did, almost all were serviced in Mexico.¹⁴
- The most common barriers to receiving proper oral health care are cost and time.¹⁵ 57% of the migrant farmworkers in one study cited limited clinic hours as a barrier to care, while 33% reported high fees as a deterrent.¹⁶ Language and cultural differences are also significant barriers. One study examining utilization rates found that 57% of those that spoke English had visited the dentist while only 34% of Spanish speakers had done so.¹⁷ Another reason for the broad disparity between the oral health of farmworkers and the rest of the population is that farmworkers typically do not seek care unless they have an oral health emergency.¹⁸ Preventive applications and health education to promote prevention are not part of emergency care. Most oral health prevention education is conducted during the course of visits to the dentist for check-ups and cleanings. In other words, prevention is put into practice with the delivery of care that farmworkers usually do not receive.¹⁹
- One study of dental services for migrant and seasonal farmworkers found that farmworkers sought care more for acute problems (44%), followed by restoration services (32%), and preventive services (26%). This is the inverse of what one would hope would be occurring.^{18a}
- One study found that oral health was one of the major health problems facing the migrant and seasonal farmworker population, as well as one of the most unmet needs in farmworker health services.²⁰ The same study found that 52 percent of farmworkers reported dental caries and 33 percent reported missing teeth. Oral sensitivity and gum problems were other common problems reported by 40 percent of those interviewed and 30 percent reported fractured or broken teeth.
- Research done in 2005 revealed that 69 percent of migrant farmworkers had at least one decayed tooth and more than 50 percent had three or more decayed teeth.²¹
- Though farmworker children have better oral health than their parents, they still experience more oral health problems than the general U.S. children population.²² Migrant farmworker children are 48 percent more likely to have decayed teeth surfaces and 47 percent less likely to have filled surfaces than U.S. school children.²³
- Studies focusing on Baby Bottle Tooth Decay (BBTD), a particular type of early childhood caries, found high rates of decay among farmworker children. BBTD is a disease of young children, characterized by a distinctive pattern of severe tooth decay in the primary dentition. BBTD has been associated with the practice of lulling babies to sleep with a bottle of milk or sweet liquid. The practice allows liquid to pool in the mouth, which can promote decay. Treatment of severe BBTD, especially for children less than 2 ½ years of age requires physical restraint, sedation or general anesthesia, and sometimes hospitalization and can be very expensive. The prevalence of BBTD in the general population is 5% or less, while among disadvantaged urban children it was found to be 20%. In a study of 125 farmworker children under the age of 4 in Yakima, Washington, published in 1992, 29.6 % of the children had BBTD.²⁴

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- ^{9b} Ibid.
- ^{9c} Centers for Disease Control. (2006). National Oral Health Surveillance System. Available online: <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/nohss/DisplayV.asp?DataSet=2&nkey=8081> [Accessed November 12, 2008].
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