



# Adolescent Oral Health Fact Sheet

Prepared for the National Institute for Health Care Management conference:  
“Closing the Gaps in Health Care for Adolescents”  
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National attention to adolescent health and “positive youth development” has not often included concern about teen oral health. Yet substantial and consequential disparities exist in adolescents’ oral health and their use of dental services.

## Adolescent Oral Health Status

**Disease Burden:** Because caries is a cumulative disease that begins in early childhood and periodontal disease is a disease that begins in early adolescence, teens have the highest disease rate of all child age groups.

**Disease Distribution:** Oral diseases are concentrated in low-income and special needs children for whom the Medicaid program is a primary source of coverage.

## Adolescent Dental Care Issues

**Coverage:** Only 40% of adolescents have dental coverage as have medical coverage. Having private dental coverage doubles the likelihood of a teen having a dental visit.

**Medicaid Access:** Adolescents in Medicaid are only 1/5th as likely to obtain dental care as medical care, and 1/3rd less likely than 4-9 year olds.

**Utilization:** As with other adolescent healthcare services, teens tend to be lower utilizers of dental services than are younger children.

The *Awesome Smiles* project\* seeks to raise awareness about adolescent oral health disparities among the dental, public health, and medical communities through four goals:

**Goal I:** Promote awareness, information, and programming on adolescent oral health and positive youth development across a spectrum of dental organizations.

**Goal II:** Actively integrate oral health in the work of other professional groups that address the needs of adolescents.

**Goal III:** Reduce oral health and dental care disparities among adolescents.

**Goal IV:** Collaborate with MCHB Office of Adolescent Health to promote its missions.

In addition, *Awesome Smiles* works closely with the National Initiative to Improve Adolescent Health by the Year 2010 to ensure the medical, dental and public health communities address the Healthy People 2010 oral health objectives that include adolescents. These objectives are:

**Objective 21-1:** Reduce the proportion of children and adolescents who have dental caries experience in their primary or permanent teeth.

**Objective 21-8:** Increase the proportion of children [including adolescents] who have received dental sealants on their molar teeth.

**Objective 21-12:** Increase the proportion of low-income children and adolescents who received any preventive dental services during the year.

\**Awesome Smiles* is the dental component of the HRSA/MCHB-funded Partners in Program Planning for Adolescent Health (PIPPAH) project. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry is the PIPPAH grantee, and the Children’s Dental Health Project is the grant program office, providing administrative and managerial support. For more information on *Awesome Smiles*, visit the “Projects” section of [www.cdhp.org](http://www.cdhp.org) or contact Mike Ambrose at (202) 833-8288; [mambrose@cdhp.org](mailto:mambrose@cdhp.org).

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