



Kansas' oral health score improves

Oral Health Kansas is releasing its third report comparing Kansas' oral health grade to the nation's performance. The Kansas Oral Health Report Card shows that our state is doing many things right, but that we have a long way to go to ensure that all Kansans are able to maintain their oral health. For the third year in a row, Kansas received a grade of C on a series of indicators, but the overall score improved.

Indicators

When Oral Health Kansas presented the first Report Card In 2021, there were 13 indicators, and over the last two years we have added four. New this year are the percentage of children up to age 17 who have had tooth decay experience in the last year and the percentage of adults with diabetes who visited the dentist in the last year. In both cases, Kansas ranks near the national average.

2023 Numbers Improve

Kansas received a C grade last year as well as this year. The average of all the point values went up from 1.93 to 2.4. This means that when it comes to dental care in Kansas, we are on the right track, but there is much room for improvement.

Areas of improvement relative to the national averages include the following indicators:

- a. Percentage of children ages 3-5 enrolled in Medicaid who received preventive dental care visit
- b. Percentage of third graders that have dental sealants on permanent molars
- c. Percentage of pregnant people who had their teeth cleaned during their pregnancy

Prevention is Key

Preventive dental visits for children should start after the first tooth appears because the early visit has the potential to provide guidance to parents on how to prevent oral diseases¹. Only 15% of children up to age 2 have visited the dentist, and only 40% of the children enrolled in KanCare have visited a dentist. There is much room for improvement in early childhood dental care when less than half of low-income children are seeing a dentist each year.

Cavities that are left untreated can cause discomfort and infections, which can make eating, speaking, playing, and learning difficult.² As a result, it is important to educate parents and caregivers about the necessity of at home dental care and regular visits to the dentist. Dental sealants can also help to avoid cavities for a long period.² Dental sealants, which are applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth, can prevent up to 80% of cavities, yet not even half of third graders in Kansas have dental sealants.

Care for Adults

Each year approximately two-thirds of Kansas adults visit the dentist. However, nearly one-third of older adults have lost 6 or more teeth due to tooth decay or gum disease. Oral health is important for overall health. Diabetes, heart disease, and stroke have all been linked to gum disease³. Gum

disease also is linked to premature births and low birth weight in pregnant women³. Less than half of pregnant women who reside in Kansas have their teeth cleaned during pregnancy.

Strategies to Improve

In 2022, the Kansas Legislature approved funding to extend Medicaid dental benefits to adults. This is the most significant new investment in dental care for low-income adults in the state's history. Ensuring adults are able to access the new dental services is the next big goal, and it is imperative that more dental offices begin to see both adults and children who have Medicaid coverage. Learn more about the new adult dental benefits on the [Oral Health Kansas website](#).

Oral Health Kansas has numerous tips, resources, and strategies on our [consumer webpage](#) that can help people maintain good oral health including educational programs.

In 2023 Oral Health Kansas is convening a new Lived Experience Advisory Group to learn more about the real oral health challenges faced by people who have Medicaid coverage. Learn more and apply to join on the [Lived Experience Advisory Group webpage](#).

We invite you to review all seventeen of the oral health indicators on the report card, as they each have a story to tell about the oral health of Kansas. Please join us in the fight to improve services, supports, and policies to increase access to optimal oral health for all Kansans.

About Oral Health Kansas

Oral Health Kansas is a statewide organization whose mission is to improve oral health in Kansas through advocacy, public awareness, and education. The organization is dedicated to promoting the importance of lifelong dental health by shaping policy and educating the public, so Kansans know that all mouths matter. Follow us on our [website](#), as well as [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

References:

¹ Michigan Health. <https://healthblog.uofmhealth.org/childrens-health/when-should-a-child-see-a-dentist-for-first-time>

² Centers for Disease and Prevention. (2021). <https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/basics/childrens-oral-health/index.html>

³ Healthy 2020. <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/leading-health-indicators/2020-lhi-topics/Oral-Health>