

Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.

Oral Health Disparities

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on oral health disparities. Erricka Hager and Bee Schindler, community engagement coordinators, University of Pittsburgh's Clinical and Translational Science Institute, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh spoke about this topic.

EB: I am excited that we're revisiting the topic of oral health, Erricka, and Bee. Oral health disparities are extreme in the United States. Despite major improvements to oral health in the population as a whole, disparities still exist for many racial groups. I am pleased that we are taking the conversation a step further to discuss these gaps. The last time we talked we encouraged our readers to take charge of their



ESTHER BUSH

health by participating in research studies. We should also make sure that parents understand the importance of starting healthy habits early in childhood.

EH: It is wonderful to talk with you, Ms. Bush, and to revisit a health topic that impacts every generation. It is good to know that progress has been made by increasing access to dental insurance for

black children. Differences still remain between black and white children. The Surgeon General has asked that everyone take action to maintain the oral health of all Americans and Mary Marazita, PhD, professor and vice chair in the Department of Oral Biology at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Dental Medicine is doing a lot of work around this.

EB: That's a great point, Erricka! Dr. Marazita states that dental caries also known as cavities are the most common chronic disease in the United States. Dental caries is also very preventable. The Surgeon General wants to change the impression of oral health and disease by removing obstacles. The Surgeon General also wants to strengthen partnerships that enhance the oral health of minority communities.

BS: There are many obstacles individuals face when going to the dentist. The Center for Oral Health Research at the University of Pittsburgh addresses these obstacles and works to remove them. Their current focus is on pregnant African American women. They are working to understand why children in Pittsburgh

and surrounding areas have more cavities than most other children. They have joined the West Virginia health department to increase access to dental hygienists. They also provide transportation and referrals to local dentists to help eliminate obstacles for participants.

EB: Wow! Dr. Marazita's team is doing a great job of focusing on obstacles faced by minority communities accessing dental health services. We must continue to have these conversations about health topics impacting the black community. Our conversations keep the community engaged and spread awareness.

EH: Yes, Ms. Bush, our conversation is necessary for changing impressions about oral health in the black community. We are providing our readers with all the tools to positively impact their oral health.

BS: Thank you so much for having this conversation with us, Ms. Bush. It was so wonderful talking with you about oral health. Thank you for inspiring children, youth and adults to take charge of their health. I look forward to next month as we discuss the relationship between physical activity and diabetes.

Why do oral health care disparities continue to affect Black children?

Oral health may not be the first thing people associate with pregnancy. But researchers believe that pregnant women may have the key to better understanding the factors that can lead to cavities in children. These factors include genetics, diet, general health, oral hygiene and mouth germs.

The University of Pittsburgh's COHRA (Center for Oral Health Research in Appalachia) study team is working to best address children's oral health. Through the COHRA



MARY MARAZITA, PhD

Smile Childhood Cavity Study, researchers are examining why young children in Appalachia have higher rates of cavities than children in other parts of the country. The study involves recruiting pregnant folks in order to track mouth health—even as the buds for a child's teeth are developing. Tracking mouth health starting in pregnancy allows for a long-term look at oral health over the lifespan. Certain exposures during pregnancy could influence the development of teeth and health of the mouth, including the development of cavities.

Cavities are the most common chronic disease in the United States and worldwide. They are the most common reason for missing work or school because of the pain associated with them, says Mary Marazita, PhD, professor and vice chair in the Department of Oral Biology at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Dental Medicine. For young people, having a toothache can lead to not being able to concentrate in school or on a task.

In 2000, the surgeon general's report Oral Health in America stated that mouth diseases disproportionately affect people who are poor and members of racial and ethnic minority groups. The report outlines the importance of oral health and its relationship to overall health and well-being. Good mouth hygiene helps keep mouths clean and healthy. An unhealthy mouth can lead to other health problems like a heart attack or stroke.

Despite more people having dental insurance and public health programs aimed at combating tooth decay, health disparities exist for Black children. Why do oral health care disparities continue to affect Black children? Dr. Marazita says limited access to affordable and healthy foods, poor water quality and poverty are big barriers that prolong oral health disparities. The COHRA team is looking at these factors as clues on how to reduce disparities.

The COHRA team works to keep communities engaged throughout the entire research process. They ask for community input when writing grant applications and share data with minority-led community organizations. The group also works with organizations in the black community to make people aware of research findings.

Dr. Marazita invites people to participate in the COHRA Smile Childhood Cavity Study. People who identify as Black, are pregnant and in their second or third trimesters and are healthy enough to have a dental exam are welcome to apply. The team will ask people who sign up to also bring in their child for at least two and a half years for follow-up study. To express interest in and learn more about the study, call Alicia at 412-648-1910.



COHRA Smile



Participants Needed Research Study of Childhood Cavities

■ Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh are studying why young children in Appalachia have a higher rate of cavities than children from other parts of the country. (Pittsburgh is the largest city in Appalachia.) Our goal is to reduce cavities in young children using the information gained from this research study.

■ We are looking for women who are:

- In the first or second trimester of pregnancy
- African American
- At least 18 years of age
- Healthy enough to have a dental exam

Research participants will receive compensation at each visit. If you complete all study procedures, you will receive \$530 by the end of the study.

(Travel expenses will also be reimbursed.)

■ This study involves several phone surveys and visits for you and your baby. For more information and to see if you qualify, please call our research coordinators at:

■ **Jayme: (412) 624-3299** ■ **Alicia: (412) 648-1910** ■ **Jill: (412) 648-1481**



University of Pittsburgh

Conducted by the University of Pittsburgh Center for Craniofacial and Dental Genetics, Dr. Mary Marazita, Director
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