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New data confirm distressing trend in child oral health

New data[1] published by the NHS in February for the financial year 2022 to 2023 expose a concerning reality: a staggering 47,581 episodes of tooth extractions for 0 to 19-year-olds in NHS hospitals, marking a distressing trend in childhood oral health.

Of these extractions, a significant 66% – 31,165 episodes – were attributed to tooth decay, underlining the pervasive impact of dental issues among the younger demographic.

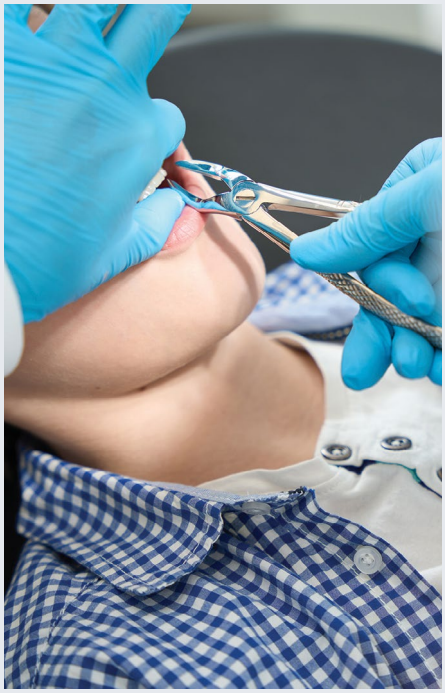
Worryingly, there has been a notable 17% increase in decay-related tooth extractions for 0 to 19-year-olds compared to the previous financial year (2021 to 2022). The increase has been attributed to the ongoing recovery of hospital services from post-COVID-19 backlogs.

Notably, children and young people residing in the most deprived communities faced a staggering 3.5 times higher decay-related tooth extraction rate than those in affluent areas, highlighting deep-rooted oral health inequalities.

Even more concerning is the revelation that tooth decay remains the leading cause of hospital admission for children aged 5 to 9 years.

Dr Nigel Carter, chief executive of the Oral Health Foundation, said: 'In the face of staggering oral health inequalities, it is disheartening to witness over 30,000 teeth being extracted due to tooth decay. It is a stark reminder of the persistent connection between dental health and deprivation.

'The current data reveal a concerning truth – although the number of extractions is lower than pre-COVID levels, the lingering backlogs in the system obscure the real extent of the issue. This



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situation is unequivocally unacceptable, demanding immediate action.

'To combat childhood tooth decay, the implementation of preventive policies such as water fluoridation and comprehensive toothbrushing programmes is imperative.

'The government must step up efforts to enhance dental access nationwide, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to receive routine dental care. It is time for a concerted effort to address this pressing public health concern and pave the way for a brighter, healthier future for our children.'

Geographical variations in decay-related tooth extraction rates are evident, with Yorkshire and the Humber reporting the highest rates (405 per 100,000 population of 0 to 19-year-olds) and the East Midlands the lowest (80 per 100,000 population of 0 to 19-year-olds).

On the financial front, the costs to the NHS for hospital admissions related to tooth extractions in children aged 0 to 19 years were estimated at £64.3 million, with £40.7 million specifically for decay-related procedures.

Dr Charlotte Eckhardt, Dean of the Faculty of Dental Surgery (FDS) at the Royal College of Surgeons of England, said that the figures 'Are a sobering reminder of the prevalence of tooth decay, something which is largely preventable. The 17% jump in the number of episodes of decay-related tooth extractions in hospitals for 0 to 19-year-olds highlights the urgent need for improved access to NHS dentists.

'Children and young people should be encouraged to brush their teeth regularly with fluoride toothpaste, visit the dentist, and cut down on sugary foods that can lead to decay. The data lay bare the huge inequalities in dental care and enormous cost to the NHS, with decay-related tooth extraction episode rates for children and young people living in the most deprived communities nearly three and a half times that of those living in the most affluent communities.

'The FDS supports the expansion of targeted fluoridation to low socioeconomic areas and the introduction of supervised tooth brushing.'

The full data are available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hospital-tooth-extractions-in-0-to-19-year-olds-2023.

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