

Nutrition and Health Education

Nutrition and tooth decay in children: a qualitative study of caregiver experiences and perspectives

J. R. de Mello¹, A. Cammer¹, K. Da Silva², P. Papagerakis², J. Lieffers¹. ¹College of Pharmacy and Nutrition, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK; ² College of Dentistry, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.

Introduction: Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in children. Many factors can cause tooth decay including oral hygiene (brushing, flossing) and diet. Foods can be labeled as: cariogenic (promotes tooth decay; e.g., sugary foods) and cariostatic (inhibits tooth decay; e.g., milk, cheese). Cariogenic foods that are consumed frequently are especially harmful. To date, there is little known about caregiver perspectives regarding nutrition and tooth decay.

Objectives: To investigate caregivers' perspectives related to the role of nutrition in tooth decay in children.

Methods: Parents/caregivers of Saskatchewan children ≤12 years diagnosed with tooth decay in the past 2 years were recruited using community-based advertising (e.g., online advertisements) to complete a semi-structured interview. All interviews (in-person; telephone) were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were managed using NVIVO software and analyzed using Interpretive Description methods.

Results: A total of 21 caregivers (17 females; 4 males) participated in interviews ranging from 22-71 mins. Variable eating behaviors were found in children, but a high consumption of sugary foods/beverages especially during breakfast, snacks and at bedtime was reported. During treatment of children's tooth decay, most caregivers did not receive any explanation for their child's tooth decay and limited/no advice on future prevention, especially related to nutrition. No caregivers were referred to or consulted a dietitian regarding tooth decay, and a few received relevant advice from oral health care providers. Caregivers indicated they would welcome increased dietitian involvement, new policies towards food labeling, and more education from professionals in different settings (e.g., parent groups).

Conclusions: Caregivers reported receiving little/no information about nutrition and tooth decay, and none received dietitian assistance on this topic. They wanted to learn more about nutrition to decrease the risk of tooth decay. More information on nutrition and tooth decay needs to be spread throughout the community using diverse channels.

Significance: Nutrition and tooth decay is an emerging practice area for dietitians. Dietitians have an important role in working collaboratively with other health professionals to decrease the burden of tooth decay. Caregivers' suggestions can help to guide development of nutrition interventions to prevent tooth decay.

Funded by: Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Centre for Patient-Oriented Research (SCPOR).