

# HKU Faculty of Dentistry researchers call for increased attention to oral health of Chinese migrant children

In China, children of families who have relocated from the country to the city tend to have poor oral health, indicating “an urgent need” for strengthened community- and school-based oral health programmes, according to a study conducted by HKU and Sun Yat-sen University.

China’s economic and urban developments are driving up the proportion of rural-to-urban migrants in the population. However, because these migrants are often not registered as new residents, national oral health surveys largely miss this group, and especially migrant children. A team of researchers – who included [Dr Xiao-li Gao](#) and [Professor Colman McGrath](#) from the HKU Faculty of Dentistry – therefore aimed to explore and understand the oral health status of 5-year-old children attending a school for migrants in Guangzhou, where rural-to-urban migrants currently make up about a third of the local population.

One dentist assessed the health of the children’s teeth and the cleanliness of their mouths. The parents completed a questionnaire on family background, oral health knowledge, their child’s background and oral habits (eg, diet, brushing routine, and visits to a dentist), and the impact of their child’s oral health on life quality (eg, pain, eating/drinking and speaking, self-image, and family impact).

Among the 138 migrant children in the study, about 86% showed signs of tooth decay and each had about 5 affected (decayed, missing, or filled) teeth. Nearly all of the affected teeth in the migrant children were cases of untreated decay. Most (97%) of the children did not have good oral hygiene.

When the data were examined according to birthplace, tooth decay was significantly more common among non-locally born than locally born children (93% versus 70%), and, on average, each non-locally born child had more affected teeth (6 versus 3).

When the data were compared with those from the latest national oral health survey, migrant children who were not born locally were more prone to tooth decay than either urban or rural children nationwide (93%, versus 70% of rural children and 62% of urban children). The

/cont...

average number of affected teeth was also greater for non-locally born migrant children (6, versus 4 for rural children and 3 for urban children). The authors suggest that the oral health of migrant children born outside Guangzhou may worsen after moving to the city partly because of the wide availability and low prices of refined/processed and unhealthy foods.

Parental reports revealed that more than a third of the migrant children regularly ate sweets/candy at bedtime and more than a quarter had not yet started brushing their teeth; only about a tenth brushed their teeth twice a day. Most (89%) had never attended a dental check-up. In addition, the quality of life for 60% of the migrant children had been reduced by their oral health.

In statistical analyses, the following factors were found to be associated with having an increased number of teeth affected by decay: being born outside Guangzhou, having parents with low education levels, bedtime feeding at the age of 1 year, eating sweets/candy at bedtime, poor oral hygiene, and two aspects of parental knowledge (not knowing that fluoride protects against tooth decay and not knowing that teeth appearing after 6 years of age also need protection). Factors that were associated with a lowered quality of life due to oral health were being born outside Guangzhou and the number of teeth affected by decay.

Although the researchers studied only one school, they comment that it was a typical school for migrant children in China. Still, they note that not all migrant children aged 5 years attend school, so their oral health “may in fact be even poorer than that of this study sample”.

According to the authors, the findings indicate the need to promote toothbrushing with fluoridated toothpastes among migrants, especially because China does not fluoridate its water supply. In addition, the authors underscore the high priority for oral health programmes to target migrants in the community and at school, as well as for dentists who specialise in children’s dentistry to support these efforts and to improve clinic services for migrants.

The study was recently published in the *International Journal of Paediatric Dentistry*.

###

**Source:** Gao XL, McGrath C, Lin HC. Oral health status of rural-urban migrant children in South China. *International Journal of Paediatric Dentistry* 2011;21:58-67.

Medline link: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20731736>

For more information about the HKU Faculty of Dentistry, visit <http://facdent.hku.hk>

For more information about oral hygiene, visit

<http://facdent.hku.hk/engagement/community/pdf/TeeththingBrushing.pdf>

<http://facdent.hku.hk/engagement/community/pdf/OralHygiene.pdf>

**Media contact:**

Dr Xiao-li Gao, Postdoctoral Fellow in Dental Public Health, HKU Faculty of Dentistry; E-mail: [gaoxl@hku.hk](mailto:gaoxl@hku.hk)

Ms Melody Tang, Communications and Development Officer, HKU Faculty of Dentistry; Tel: 2859 0210; E-mail: [meltang@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:meltang@hkucc.hku.hk)

© 2011 Faculty of Dentistry, The University of Hong Kong. Prepared by Dr Trevor Lane, Knowledge Transfer Unit, HKU Faculty of Dentistry. Although every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the contents of this news release, they do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Faculty or University and are intended for informational or educational use only; the copyright owner accepts no responsibility for errors or omissions.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 HK License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/hk/)