Pregnant mothers on Medicaid are almost 100% at-risk of transmitting dental disease to their babies. Understanding how the process works and taking simple steps can result in two-year-olds with no tooth decay. See the back of this sheet for specific instructions on how to reduce decay.

One of the major bacteria that cause tooth decay is called Strep Mutans. Everyone has this bacteria in their mouth. This bacteria grows and duplicates when sugar is present.

The bacteria forms a biofilm called plaque and can create an acid that dissolves the supporting organic material, allowing the enamel crystal to collapse which causes cavities.

The strep mutan is transferred from primary care giver (usually the mother) to the child through contact with saliva, etc.

If this oral infection is transmitted to the baby while the baby’s own immune system is being developed (within the first six months) the baby’s immune system may recognize this high count of bacteria as normal and not build defenses to fight the bacteria.

If the baby’s immune system doesn’t fight off the bacteria it may cause rampant decay of the teeth, which can result in hospitalization, unnecessary costs and may cause the child to fear future visits to the dentist.
How can moms stop the cycle of tooth decay?

The pregnant mom needs to visit the dentist after the first trimester and the dental hygienist to get her teeth cleaned, her infection eliminated and her strep mutan count low before delivery.

Chlorhexidine mouth rinse is prescribed by the dentist for the mother to use during her last month of pregnancy. She is to rinse twice a day for two weeks to reduce the strep mutan level.

Following delivery, the mom will chew two pieces of xylitol gum, three times a day for six months. (see xylitol handout)

When the baby gets its first four incisors, between 9 and 12 months, the baby and mother go to the dentist to have a fluoride varnish painted on the teeth. The baby goes every six months until they are two years old. If white spots appear on the teeth the baby will go more often for fluoride treatments.

The parent should also continue to brush the child’s teeth with a pea-sized amount of toothpaste at bedtime -- spitting, not rinsing out.

By this time, the baby will have all of its primary teeth and their immune system will be developed to help reduce tooth decay. Brushing daily will also reduce tooth decay.