

Oral Health and Pregnancy

As a woman you have special needs at different points of your life. Your oral health is no exception, and can be affected by hormonal changes during puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause. While good oral health, which includes care of the teeth, gums and mouth, is important in any stage of your life, it is very important during pregnancy.

What are some common dental problems during pregnancy?

Pregnant women are at higher risk for developing tooth decay. They are also particularly vulnerable to gum disease (gingivitis) and a chronic bacterial disease that affects the gums, attachment fibers and bone supporting the teeth (periodontal disease or periodontitis). These risks increase in women who smoke, experience nutritional deficiencies, or have less frequent visits to the dentist. Gingivitis is often caused by inadequate oral hygiene and is reversible with professional treatment and good oral care. Untreated gingivitis can advance to periodontitis.

How does pregnancy affect teeth and gums?

- Pregnant women and those who take some oral contraceptives experience high levels of the hormone progesterone. Elevated levels of this hormone increase gum sensitivity to the bacteria found in plaque and may cause gingivitis (red, puffy or tender gums that easily bleed when brushing).
- Increased need and desire for food and snacking, especially on sticky foods that stay on teeth longer, may cause tooth decay.
- Morning sickness (nausea and vomiting) during pregnancy can also increase the incidence of dental health problems. Frequent vomiting can leave stomach acids in the mouth. If this acid is not cleared away quickly, it can damage surfaces of teeth and cause tooth decay.

- Pregnant women sometimes get very busy and may run out of time and energy to care for themselves and their dental health.
- In addition, pregnant women may not experience symptoms until they reach advanced disease stages.

Could gum disease affect your baby's health?

Anything that damages a mother's health can also affect her baby. Emerging evidence and new research have shown a relationship between pre-term, low birth weight babies and gingivitis. The excessive bacteria which cause gingivitis can enter the bloodstream through the gums and travel to the uterus, triggering the production of chemicals called "prostaglandins," which are suspected to induce premature labor.

Are x-rays safe?

If you are pregnant, you can postpone dental x-rays until after your baby is born. If your dentist recommends dental x-rays, the dental office will provide a leaded apron to shield you and your baby from the low dose of radiation used.

Ways of keeping your teeth healthy

Chew sugar-free gum with xylitol in it right after eating to prevent the spread of germs to your children.

Practice good dental hygiene. To help prevent tooth decay and gum disease, keep your mouth clean, brush your teeth thoroughly and remove plaque. Clean between teeth daily with floss or inter-dental cleaners.

Visit the dentist regularly. Regular dental cleanings and check-ups before, during and after your pregnancy are important. Let your dentist know that you are pregnant.

Eat healthy, nutritious food. Your baby's teeth begin to develop between the third and sixth month of pregnancy. Eating a balanced diet (based on new dietary guidelines) is not only necessary for your health, but what you eat during pregnancy also affects the development of your unborn child—including teeth. Avoid foods that are sticky or contain a lot of sugar. These foods can cause tooth decay.

References and Sources

American Dental Association at www.ada.org.

American Academy of Periodontology at www.perio.org.



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