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What expectant mothers need to know about oral health

If you are pregnant or are considering becoming pregnant, dental experts say it is important not to overlook oral health care. Your oral health is an important part of your overall health, and good dental hygiene habits not only help prevent oral problems during pregnancy, they also affect the health of your unborn child.

- During your pregnancy, you may experience a surge in hormones, particularly progesterone, which may cause a change in how the body reacts to the bacteria in plaque.
- Plaque is a sticky, colorless film of bacteria that covers your teeth. If plaque isn't removed daily, it can eventually harden into tartar and may increase your risk of gingivitis, a condition with symptoms of red, swollen and tender gums that are more likely to bleed.
- "Pregnancy gingivitis" frequently occurs in the second to eighth month. If you already have gingivitis, the condition could worsen during your pregnancy. Left untreated, gingivitis can lead to gum (periodontal) disease.
- Occasionally overgrowths of gum tissue, called "pregnancy tumors," appear on the gums during the second trimester. Usually found between the teeth and believed to be related to excess plaque, these growths or swellings are often surgically removed after the baby is born. If you experience pregnancy tumors, see your dentist.

It's especially important to maintain good oral health during pregnancy. Studies indicate that pregnant women who have severe gum disease may be at increased risk for pre-term delivery, which in turn increases the risk of having a low-birthweight baby. If you notice any changes in your mouth during pregnancy, see your dentist.

There is also much new research indicating that the health of your mouth mirrors the condition of your body as a whole. When your mouth is healthy, chances are your overall health is good, too.

All of these are excellent reasons why it is important to protect your oral health.

How oral health affects your baby

New research suggests a link between gum disease and pre-term, low birthweight babies.

Though findings are inconclusive and further research is needed, we do know preventive dental care during pregnancy improves oral health and overall health and is safe for both mother and child.

What you can do

- Brush twice daily and floss at least once a day — these basic oral health practices will help reduce plaque buildup and keep your mouth healthy.
- Have your teeth professionally cleaned. If you are pregnant or suspect you are pregnant:
  - Schedule a checkup in your first trimester for a cleaning. If your pregnancy is more advanced, call your dentist for the first available appointment.
  - Your dentist will assess your oral health and map out a dental plan for the rest of your pregnancy.
- The American Dental Association recommends avoiding routine or elective x-rays during pregnancy.
- Always call your dentist if you have any questions or concerns.

Diet, pregnancy and oral health

What you eat during your pregnancy affects the development of your unborn child — including your baby's teeth, which begin to develop between the third and sixth month of pregnancy. It's important to receive sufficient amounts of nutrients — especially calcium, protein, phosphorous, and vitamins A, C and D.

Calcium, pregnancy and teeth

It is a myth that calcium is lost from the mother's teeth during pregnancy. The calcium your baby needs is provided by your diet, not by your teeth. If dietary calcium is inadequate, however, your body will provide this mineral from stores in your bones. An adequate intake of dairy products — the primary source of calcium — or the supplements your obstetrician may recommend will help ensure that you get all the calcium you need during your pregnancy.

Between-meal snacking

When you're eating for two, you may want to eat between meals. However, frequent snacking on foods high in sugars and starches — such as candy, cookies or potato chips — can lead to tooth decay.

Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals made up of foods from the five major food groups: breads, cereals and other grains; fruits; vegetables; meat, fish, poultry and alternatives to protein, such as soy or eggs; and milk, yogurt and cheese. When you do eat between meals, make nutritious food choices, such as raw fruits, fresh vegetables and dairy products. Always follow your physician's advice regarding diet during pregnancy.

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