



Good oral health is essential to maintaining a beautiful smile and pain-free teeth and gums. But did you know that your oral health can affect the general health of you and your baby?



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YOUR *Oral Health* **AND PREGNANCY**



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How does my oral health affect me and my baby?



If you're pregnant, you're probably taking vitamins, eating a healthy diet, getting plenty of exercise and seeing your doctor regularly to ensure your baby's health. But have you made time

for your oral health? Women who are pregnant are often at risk for *pregnancy gingivitis*, a form of periodontal (gum) disease recently linked to low birth-weight/premature babies.*

Your increased risk for periodontal disease comes from changes in hormone levels that increase the blood flow to gum tissue. As a result, your gums become more sensitive and vulnerable to irritation and swelling. At the same time, your body's normal response to the bacteria that cause periodontal infections is decreased. Gingivitis usually starts during the second to third month of pregnancy and can become more serious through the eighth month.

While a direct connection has yet to be established, more studies are finding a link between periodontal disease and low birth-weight/premature babies.* Be sure to maintain your oral health care regimen during pregnancy.

What is good oral health?

- The first key to good oral health is to **brush** your teeth as often as your dentist recommends. Most people brush at least twice a day. Also, check with

your dentist and see if there's a right toothbrush for you—dentists often suggest a soft-bristled brush.

When it comes to technique, it's not how *hard* you brush, but *how* you brush. Be sure to reach all the surfaces between your teeth and gums, rather than just apply more pressure. To best reach the outsides and insides of your teeth, hold your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to your gums and use short back-and-forth motions. Hold the brush vertically to reach the backs of upper and lower front teeth. Use a back-and-forth motion to clean the crevices on the chewing surfaces of your teeth.

Removing food debris from your teeth ensures that sugar and acids don't wear down the enamel on your teeth, which leads to tooth decay. Don't forget to brush your tongue and the inside of your cheeks—both have pores where bacteria hide.

- Second, use dental **floss** or an interdental cleaner everyday. Flossing removes tooth-decay causing plaque from places that your toothbrush can't reach, as well as food debris that, if left between your teeth, causes bad breath and leads to gum disease. Be sure to rinse your mouth when you're finished flossing.



Antibacterial mouthwashes may also help.

- Finally, **diet** contributes to oral health. Sweets, soft drinks and other nonnutritious foods can lead to tooth decay when bacteria in the mouth mix with the sugars in these foods and

produce acids that attack the teeth. Brush after meals and limit snacking to help minimize this risk. Drinking water throughout the day also helps rinse the mouth and neutralizes harsh acids.

Maintaining good oral health also requires professional care. Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and oral exams and inform your dentist immediately if you experience any of the following conditions:

- red, swollen or tender gums
- bleeding while brushing or flossing
- gums that pull away from the teeth and/or loose or separating teeth
- red, white or swollen areas in any part of your mouth
- persistent bad breath

Alert your dentist if you are diabetic, receiving chemotherapy or taking medications for a chronic medical condition, or if there has been any change in your health. Your dentist can help you manage oral conditions that may result from your medical condition. Your—and your baby's—smile could depend on it!

Additional related information can be found on the Web sites of the Academy of General Dentistry, www.agd.org and the American Dental Association, www.ada.org; and in Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000.

*Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000.

