

Oral Health

Women have unique oral health concerns. Changing hormone levels during your menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and menopause can raise your risk for problems in your mouth, teeth, or gums. Health issues such as diabetes can also affect your oral health. Regular brushing, flossing, and dentist visits can help prevent disease in your mouth and the rest of your body.

Q: What is oral health?

A: Oral health is the health of your mouth, including your teeth, gums, throat, and bones around the mouth. Oral health problems, such as gum disease, might be a sign that you have other health problems. Gum diseases are infections caused by plaque, which is a sticky film of bacteria that forms on your teeth. If left untreated, the bacteria in plaque can destroy the tissue and bone around your teeth, leading to tooth loss. Infections in your mouth can also affect your unborn baby if you are pregnant.

Q: How often should I brush and floss my teeth?

A: Dentists recommend that everyone brush their teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and floss once a day. Flossing removes plaque between your teeth, a place that you can't reach by brushing. You can also remove this plaque with tools other than floss. These tools, called interdental cleaners, include wooden or plastic picks and water flossers.

Q: How do women's hormones affect oral health?

A: Changing hormone levels at different stages of a woman's life can affect oral health. When your hormone levels change, your gums can get swollen

and irritated. Your gums may also bleed, especially during pregnancy, when your body's immune system is more sensitive than usual. This can cause inflammation (redness, swelling, and sometimes pain) in the gums. Regular, careful brushing and flossing can lessen gum irritation and bleeding.

Other causes of changing hormone levels that may affect your oral health include:

- Your menstrual cycle
- Hormonal birth control
- Menopause

Q: I'm pregnant. Is it safe for me to get a dental checkup?

A: Yes. You need to continue your regular dentist visits to help protect your teeth during pregnancy.

- **Tell your doctor you are pregnant.** Because you are pregnant, your dentist might not take routine x-rays. But the health risk to your unborn baby is very small. If you need emergency treatment or specific dental x-rays to treat a serious problem, your doctor can take extra care to protect your baby.
- **Schedule your dental exam early in your pregnancy.** After your 20th week of pregnancy, you may be uncomfortable sitting in a dental chair.
- **Have all needed dental treatments.** If you avoid treatment, you may risk your own health and your baby's health.

Q: How can I prevent oral health problems?

A: You can help prevent oral health problems by taking the following steps:

- Visit your dentist once or twice a year. Your dentist may recommend more or fewer visits depending on your oral health. At most routine visits, the dentist and a dental hygienist (assistant) will treat you. During regular checkups, dentists look for signs of disease, infections, and injuries.
- Choose healthy foods. Limit the amount of sugary foods and drinks you have. Lower your risk for tooth decay by brushing after meals and flossing once a day.
- Don't smoke. Smoking raises your risk of gum disease and mouth and throat cancers. It can also stain your teeth and cause bad breath.
- Drink less soda. Try to replace soda with water. Even diet soda has acids that can erode tooth enamel.

For more information...

For more information about oral health, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Division of Oral Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, CDC, HHS

770-488-6054 • www.cdc.gov/OralHealth

Academy of General Dentistry

1-888-243-3368 • www.agd.org

American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry

312-337-2169 • www.aapd.org

American Academy of Periodontology

312-787-5518 • www.perio.org

American Dental Association

312-440-2500 • www.ada.org

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