

3 Ways Pregnancy Can Affect Your Oral Health

Discovering you're pregnant may be one of your life's greatest moments. Whether you're filled with excitement, anxiety or both, it's safe to say it'll bring with it many changes. One area of change that's often overlooked is the mouth. Here's a brief outline of some of the changes that can occur and ways to manage them:

1. Pregnancy Gingivitis

Hormonal changes in the body can lead to inflammation of the gums, also known as gingivitis, and can affect up to half of pregnant women. This is often noticed as mild swelling and tenderness in the gums coupled with increased bleeding when brushing and flossing. A more advanced form of gingivitis is periodontitis, which is more aggressive because it attacks both the gums *and* bone around the teeth. Several research studies have suggested that women with periodontitis run a greater risk of delivering pre-term or low birth weight babies.

So what can you do?

- To help keep disease at bay, try to maintain good oral hygiene habits before, during and after pregnancy. That means brushing twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing once a day, even if gums are tender or bleeding.
- With fatigue and nausea as common foes for pregnant women, find times of the day to brush and floss when these symptoms are not as prevalent so that you're less likely to skip on these measures.
- Stay on track with your dental hygiene visits, especially during your second and third trimesters, to help manage or prevent gum and periodontal disease. Hygienists are able to clean areas under and around the gums that can't be reached with your brush or floss alone.

2. Enamel Erosion

Morning sickness, heartburn and acid reflux are common symptoms of pregnancy and contribute to increased acidity in the mouth. This increased acidity means your tooth enamel is under attack more frequently. Once enamel is lost, it cannot be replaced naturally and leaves teeth more vulnerable to tooth decay, sensitivity and chipping. Enamel loss also leads to thinner teeth causing them to look more yellow.

So what can you do?

- You can reduce acidity by introducing neutralizing agents like xylitol (an all natural sweetener found in many fruits and vegetables; its extracted form is often derived from the bark of hardwood trees), water and fluoride more often. Chewing xylitol gum, drinking plain water and rinsing daily with a neutral fluoride mouth rinse (like 0.05% Opti-Rinse™) are all great

measures. You can also try introducing small portions of hard cheeses more often for their calcium neutralizing effect.

- Avoid introducing highly acidic foods or beverages too often (examples: citrus fruit, carbonated beverages, herbal teas) and when you do indulge consider introducing sips of water in between and for beverages you can use a straw to limit bathing teeth in the liquid.
- Instead of brushing immediately after a meal/snack or episode of vomiting, swish with baking soda water for 30 seconds or longer (keep a pre-mixed bottle hand of 1 cup of water to 1 teaspoon of baking soda), spit it out and wait at least 30 minutes before brushing.

3. Pregnancy Dry Mouth

A decrease in saliva production during pregnancy creates a more favourable acidic environment for cavity-causing bacteria to thrive in. With the changes in many pregnant women's eating habits (influenced by nausea and cravings), this problem is further compounded. Often, higher carbohydrate food choices (ex. toast, crackers) and more frequent snacking contribute further to increasing acidity and providing fuel for bacteria to cause cavities.

So what can you do?

- In addition to the above outlined measures, try to maintain a healthy, balanced diet as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of water (tap or bottled spring water are good but avoid the reverse osmosis type which is acidic) to hydrate your body and mouth.
- Chew sugarless gum (like the ones containing xylitol) to help stimulate saliva production, particularly after eating and drinking.
- Keep on top of your dental check-ups especially if you're planning on getting pregnant. Your dentist may identify problems that can be reversed or treated early to prevent complications later. Cavity-causing bacteria is transmissible to your baby after birth so ensuring you have optimal dental health is as important for your baby as it is for you.

The journey of motherhood will bring with it many lessons and one such lesson is the importance of caring for yourself in order to better care for your baby. Caring for your mouth is a great place to start and your dental team can work alongside you to ensure you keep your gums, bone and teeth healthy, both for you and your baby.

Dr. Vivian Khouri is a practicing dentist at Hammond Dental Centre and she and her husband are currently expecting their second child.

