

Women's dental health

Do women need to be more careful with their oral health?

Women's oral health depends on their different stages of life. For many women, these changes are directly related to surges in sex hormone levels, such as in puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, lactation and menopause. Women are also more likely to be diagnosed with TMJ, Myofascial pain, eating disorders, and Sjogren's Syndrome (dry mouth).

What types of conditions will my dentist watch for? As a woman, you need to adhere to good oral hygiene. Make sure to brush with fluoride toothpaste at least twice a day and after each meal when possible and floss thoroughly each day. To help avoid problems, your dentist may request to see you more frequently during hormonal surges.

Puberty- The surge in hormones that occurs during puberty may cause swollen gums, especially during menstruation. Herpes-type lesions and ulcers also can develop. Girls may experience sensitive gums that react more to irritants.

Oral Contraceptives-- Oral contraceptives mimic pregnancy because they contain progesterone or estrogen. Therefore gingivitis may occur with long-term use. Use of certain antibiotics while taking oral contraceptives can decrease its effectiveness. Women who use birth control pills are twice as likely to develop dry sockets and should consult their dentist before scheduling major dental procedures.

Pregnancy- Pregnant women have a risk for increased inflammation of the gums because of the surge in estrogen and progesterone. If the plaque isn't removed, it can cause gingivitis-red, swollen, tender gums that are more likely to bleed. And, women with periodontal disease may be at risk for pre-term, low-birth weight babies. They are also at risk for developing pregnancy tumors- inflammatory, benign growths that develop when swollen gums become irritated. Usually these tumors shrink soon after the pregnancy is over. If a woman experiences morning sickness, it is important to neutralize the acid caused by vomiting which causes tooth erosion. Patients can use a paste made of baking soda and water, rubbing it on the teeth. After 30 seconds, rinse off the paste, then brush and floss. If this is not possible, rinse with water.

Menopause-- During menopause, some women can experience dry mouth, burning sensation, and changes in taste. Gums can even become sore and sensitive. Hormonal replacement therapy may cause gums to bleed, swell and become red.

Other factors--Diet pills and certain medications (over-the-counter and prescriptions) can decrease salivary flow, which puts patients at risk for cavities, gum disease and discomfort. Patients with eating disorders, such as bulimia (self-induced vomiting) can't hide their symptoms from their dentists because the episodes of bingeing and purging cause erosion on the backside of the upper front teeth. (An additional sign is sores that appear at the corners of the mouth.) Smoking also creates a higher risk for periodontal disease.

How will my dentist know if I have a problem?

Keep your dentist informed if you experience changes in your oral health or if you are approaching a different life stage. Also, visiting your dentist regularly will help him or her see any physical changes in your mouth. Your dentist should complete a thorough medical history to determine if you are at a higher risk for problems.