

Congratulations

on your pregnancy!

Now, more than ever, it is important to eat healthy, exercise appropriately and take care of your teeth. Recent research suggests serious gum disease, called periodontitis, can cause your baby to be born too early (premature birth) and too small (low birth weight).

How can my oral health affect my pregnancy?

Many risk factors contribute to mothers having premature, low birth weight babies—smoking, alcohol use, drug use and infections. Mounting evidence suggests pregnant women who have periodontal disease may be as much as seven times more likely to have a baby that is premature.

How does periodontal disease affect my overall health?

When infection is present, your body will fight to stay healthy. Scientists believe this produces byproducts and chemicals that can travel through the blood stream to other parts of the body. If these chemicals reach your uterus, they may cause premature labor before the fetus has fully developed.

What are the health risks for a baby born too early and too small?

Premature birth can lead to serious consequences for the baby. Premature birth is the leading cause of neonatal death (within the first month of life) and can lead to lifelong health problems such as mental retardation, blindness, chronic lung disease and cerebral palsy.



Should I visit my dentist when I'm pregnant?

Yes. Make an appointment with your dentist, periodontist and/or hygienist at least once during your pregnancy. Normal pregnancy can affect your gums and cause swelling, inflammation or bleeding due to hormonal changes in the body. This is called pregnancy gingivitis, and it often begins in the second or third month of pregnancy and may increase in severity throughout the eighth month. You should have your teeth checked and cleaned regularly, and ask for a referral to a periodontist for an evaluation as part of your prenatal care. Preventive measures, including tooth brushing and flossing should be followed aggressively during and after your pregnancy.



Will dental work pose a risk to my unborn baby?

Normal dental work shouldn't be cause for concern, but delaying needed dental work could pose a risk to your baby. For example, badly decayed teeth or impacted wisdom teeth can be a source of infection that can spread, putting both mother and fetus in danger. Be sure to tell your dentist and/or hygienist that you are pregnant, so that necessary precautions can be taken. X-rays should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Can I do anything to help ensure that my teeth are healthy during pregnancy?

Yes.

- Be sure to follow a good diet and avoid refined sugar, which contributes to tooth decay and gum disease.
- Eat foods high in Vitamin C to strengthen your gums.
- Meet all of your calcium requirements to keep teeth and bones strong and healthy.
- Brush and floss regularly, at least twice a day.
- Monitor your dental health on a daily basis—if you notice gums that bleed easily, red, swollen, tender gums, gums that have pulled away from the teeth and persistent bad breath or bad taste, contact your dentist.
- Brush your tongue when you brush your teeth to further reduce bacteria to keep your breath fresh.
- Visit your dentist and/or periodontist to help give your baby a healthy start!

Fast Facts

- Studies have shown a relationship between periodontal disease, known as periodontitis, and preterm, low birth weight babies. In fact, pregnant women who have periodontal disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that is born too early (premature) and too small (low birth weight).
- Periodontitis is a bacterial gum infection that can lead to the destruction of the bone and fibers supporting the teeth and may result in tooth loss.
- Any infection, including periodontitis, is cause for concern during pregnancy. While the mouth appears to be small, the mass of tissue in the oral cavity is actually equivalent to the skin on a person's arm extending from the wrist to the elbow. If this area was red, swollen and infected, most people would most likely visit a doctor!
- Premature birth is the leading cause of neonatal death (within the first month of life) and can lead to serious lifelong health problems such as mental retardation, blindness, chronic lung disease and cerebral palsy.
- Many people are unaware of the status of their periodontal health. A visit to the dentist or periodontist for a periodontal evaluation *before* getting pregnant or early in the pregnancy should be considered.



Fast Facts Sources

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- *What To Expect When You're Expecting*, Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, Sandee E. Hathaway, B.S.N., Workman Publishing.



Other Resources

- www.perio.org/consumer/women.htm#pre
- www.nohic.nidcr.nih.gov/
- www.washingtonfamilies.com/archive/gum-disease.htm
- www.womenshealth.about.com/health/womenshealth/library/weekly/aa121499f.htm
- www.marchofdimes.com/prematurity/index.asp

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