

# Good Oral Health Is Essential During Pregnancy

## Article Chapters

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It's no secret that pregnancy is an important time in a woman's life. While women often hear about how pregnancy causes physical changes that affect their hormone or appetite levels, these changes can have a great effect on their oral health as well. Despite the fact that good oral health is essential for the overall health of both mother and child, only 22 to 34 percent of women in the United States visit a dentist during pregnancy. In fact, dental care during pregnancy is not only safe and effective, it's essential for combating the adverse effects of oral disease, according to an article published in the May/June 2010 issue of *General Dentistry*, the peer reviewed clinical journal of the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

Dentists have the ability to maintain the oral health of expectant mothers by treating the dental findings that are common during pregnancy.

"Hormonal changes during pregnancy can result in several changes in the mouth," says Homa Amini, DDS, co-author of the article. "Reports show that the most common oral disease is gingivitis, which has been reported in 30 to 100 percent of pregnancies."

Gingivitis, a buildup of plaque that causes inflammation of the gums, should be treated with a professional cleaning and proper tooth brushing and flossing. If left untreated, gingivitis can lead to periodontitis, a more serious form of gum disease. "Patients tend to delay the treatment of oral disease due to concerns for fetal safety; however, routine dental treatment can be performed safely at any time during pregnancy," says Dr. Amini. What's more, untreated dental disease can lead to pain, infections and unnecessary exposure to medications, any of which could harm the developing fetus. Poor oral health also can affect the nutritional intake of expectant mothers, which is essential for fetal growth and survival.

The hormonal fluctuations that result from pregnancy can produce benign pregnancy tumors in the mouth. These tumors usually appear after the first trimester and typically go away after delivery; however, surgical removal may be required when these tumors bleed, interfere with eating or do not resolve after delivery. In addition to examining for oral disease, dentists may notice dental erosion—the chemical or mechanochemical destruction of tooth material—in pregnant women, due to increased acid in the mouth following morning sickness.

"To neutralize acid after vomiting, pregnant women should rinse the mouth with a mixture of a teaspoon of baking soda dissolved in a cup of water," says Patricia Meredith, DDS, FAGD, spokesperson for the AGD. "The teeth should be brushed only after the mouth has been rinsed and the acid has been neutralized to prevent further damage to the enamel."

Oral health assessment and treatment should be an essential part of prenatal care, as these steps allow the patient to receive ongoing advice concerning proper oral hygiene and infant oral health care.