

What is the relationship between pregnancy and oral health?

Sex hormones can reduce a woman's resistance to dental plaque and can cause gingival disease. Studies have shown that oral inflammation may possibly be linked to pregnancy complications such as preterm labor or low birth weight babies.

During pregnancy, gingivitis results from elevated serum progesterone and bacteria in the plaque. This occurs to about 70% of all pregnant women and becomes evident in the second and third trimesters. Warning signs include:

- Gums that are tender, swollen, or red
- Gums that bleed when you brush or floss
- Bad breath that you can't get rid of, or a bad taste in your mouth.

Studies have pointed out that oral infections are a risk factor which leads to higher incidence of low birth weight and preterm babies. Prostaglandins are produced and released during inflammation. In pregnancy a specific kind of prostaglandin, PGE-2, is involved in bone reabsorption and in stimulating the uterus to contract. Both inflammation and progesterone levels increase the production of prostaglandins and gingival tissues of pregnant women. The hypothesis is that women with periodontal disease who give birth to preterm and low birth weight babies have higher levels of PGE-2.

The following guide should help you maintain good oral health during pregnancy:

1. Brush at least twice a day (preferably in the morning and at bedtime) with a soft bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste for at least two minutes.
2. Floss daily to remove plaque from between your teeth and under the gum line (bedtime is best).
3. Eat a well-balanced diet with lots of calcium- this will help keep teeth, gums and bones healthy, while helping your baby as well.
4. Visit your dentist for regular checkups and cleanings. Let them know if you are pregnant.
5. Consider a preconception checkup to attend to problems before they get out of hand.
6. If you have any signs of gingivitis, tooth decay, or pain, see your dentist.
7. To find a dentist go to www.ada.org and click on "find a dentist".
8. Here in the seacoast area, Families First has a dental clinic available to low income families, call them for further information.