

Pregnancy and Oral Health

– Dental Health Foundation November 2021



Pregnancy can be a wonderful time. It can also be a challenging time when your body goes through many changes, physical, hormonal, and emotional. With so much happening in your life, it can be tough to keep abreast of a good oral health and hygiene routine. But in doing so, you will be enhancing your overall health and wellbeing. Evidence has shown that good oral health care and diet during the pre-natal term can positively affect both you and your baby's development, including their teeth.

Increased hormonal levels in your body can make your gums swell, become tender, and more vulnerable to plaque and bacteria and if not addressed this could lead to gingivitis.

Recent evidence has linked tooth decay and gum disease with low birth weight, preterm delivery, and iron deficiency, so it is important to visit your dentist during pregnancy and let them know if you are pregnant at a regular visit. Your dentist will give your teeth a cleaning (scale and polish) and show you how to keep your teeth clean when you are at home. They can also discuss with you any dental treatments that are best left until after pregnancy.

The main causes of tooth decay are frequent consumption of sugary foods and drinks and cleaning your gums and teeth incorrectly. Did you know that bacteria which cause tooth decay (*Streptococcus mutans*) can be transferred from a parent/carer to an infant through practices such as sharing spoons and cups, testing food temperature, or licking soothers? Toothbrushing is therefore very important for mothers/parents/carers.

Specific oral health tips if you are pregnant

Hormonal changes and gum problems during pregnancy can make your gums more vulnerable to plaque/bacteria and more likely to bleed. This type of gum disease is called gingivitis



and may occur during the second trimester. Symptoms include swelling of the gums and bleeding, usually when brushing your teeth or flossing between the teeth. Periodontal disease is caused by untreated gingivitis and may result in damage to the tissues and bones that surround and anchor the teeth, which

can lead to tooth loss later on. If you have gum problems during pregnancy, it's important to have a check-up with your dentist before you give birth. While most types of gum problems caused by pregnancy hormones settle after birth, a small number of women may need treatment after pregnancy.

Hormonal and emotional changes can start as early as the first couple of weeks. Fatigue, lethargy, anxiety of becoming a parent, and perhaps coping with both pregnancy and an already existing family of younger children can all impact your ability to focus on your own health. Allow yourself a little time every day to check in with your oral health and develop a daily practice that will benefit you in small but meaningful ways.

Toothbrushing If your gums bleed, don't stop brushing your teeth. Use a soft-headed toothbrush and brush your teeth twice daily for 2-3 minutes using fluoride toothpaste (1450 ppm) which helps to protect your tooth enamel. Spit out toothpaste, don't rinse after brushing, as this will wash the fluoride off your teeth. Replace the brush every 3-4 months as worn bristles are not effective at removing the plaque from your teeth. Also remember to floss daily to reduce plaque build-up, ask your dental team for advice on the correct technique so that you don't damage your gums.

If you experience a gagging sensation when brushing your teeth (especially your back teeth) try a toothbrush with a smaller head, a child's toothbrush is handy for this, and brush your teeth slowly.

Morning sickness - If you vomit, suffer from acid reflux, or have heartburn during pregnancy, rinse your mouth out with water to help remove the acid from your teeth. The stomach acid will soften your tooth enamel so do not brush straight away, wait about an hour to avoid brushing acid on your enamel. Keep hydrated and sip water, avoid soft drinks or juices throughout the day as these are also acidic.

Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol during pregnancy, both are linked to premature birth and low birth weight. The HSE advises that no amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy is safe for your baby, it also increases the risk of miscarriage and can damage your baby's developing brain and body.

Breast milk is best for babies however if infant formula is used it can be made using fluoridated tap water. The Irish Expert Body on Fluorides and Health, advises that currently there is no significant evidence of any adverse effects to the health of infants consuming infant formula made up with tap water which has been fluoridated at current statutory levels in

Ireland (0.6-0.8ppm Fluoride). Where a person is unsure about what to do, ask a health professional such as a dentist, public health nurse or paediatrician for advice.

Diet A healthy diet is a well-known part of a healthy pregnancy. Your diet will also have an impact on the development of your baby's teeth which are already budding beneath their gums. Your baby is born with a full set of baby teeth waiting to emerge! If you suffer from morning sickness and can only eat small amounts during the day, try to choose healthy snacks like fruit, vegetables, bread, or crackers and low-fat dairy products like milk, cheese, or unsweetened yoghurt which are rich in calcium and important for healthy teeth and bones. Low-fat dairy products contain the same amount of calcium as the full-fat version. Vitamin D3 is also important during pregnancy as it helps your body to absorb calcium. Some research has suggested an association between low Vitamin D levels and markers of periodontal disease.

Hydration Stay well hydrated when you are pregnant preferably with water and milk and avoid fizzy drinks which are not recommended for either your overall health or your teeth. Did you know that due to the sugar and acid content in regular juice it is advisable to have only one small glass of either unsweetened juice or smoothie per day and with a meal?

Food Cravings If you have food cravings for sugary foods try and have these in very small amounts only once or twice a week, perhaps choose, sweet fruits like blueberries, banana, pineapple or mango that may satisfy you instead. It is generally recommended for better oral health to avoid foods that are high in sugar for example sweets, chocolate, cakes, biscuits, and fizzy drinks. Reading food labels at the back of packaging is a good way of informing yourself of both the contents and the amount of sugar you consume - less than 5g per 100g is low sugar.

Covid 19 and Toothbrushing Hygiene

We all now appreciate the importance of good handwashing and coughing/sneezing etiquette. It is important that we get used to these new routines and continue with good oral hygiene. The mouth and nose are the main entry points for Coronavirus, and we must be careful to avoid infection while we care for our teeth and mouth.

USEFUL ADVICE

- 1. Never share toothbrushes.**
- 2. Wash Hands Before Brushing Teeth.** We know that the virus is transmitted by hands touching the face or mouth. However, we often forget to wash our hands before we brush our teeth. Develop a routine to wash hands—and then brush, floss, and wash face and hands. Don't forget to also wash your hands, and your child's hands, before brushing their teeth and keep their toothbrush clean.
- 3. Clean Toothbrush After Brushing.** Rinse the Toothbrush in warm water after each use.
- 4. Toothbrush Holders.** Toothbrush heads should never touch. Place toothbrushes standing upright in an open container after brushing, store brushes separately in individual holders like a glass/jam jar. Get children to mark their own name with an indelible marker Don't place it down on a countertop or lie on the handbasin. Disinfect containers that hold brushes. Run toothbrushes containers through a complete dishwasher cycle or wash in warm water and liquid detergent. Put brushes in holders in a safe place. Store toothbrush away from the toilet. Flushing the toilet produces aerosols that can land on your toothbrush, so it is good practice to put the lid down on the toilet before flushing.
- 5. Good Practice with Toothpaste.** If you are sharing a bathroom with the family, and to avoid cross-contamination from the toothpaste/toothbrush we recommend that you don't dispense the toothpaste directly onto your toothbrush but dispense it either onto the edge of a plate, so that toothbrushes don't touch each other or onto a clean piece of disposable kitchen towel – which can be disposed of afterwards.
- 6. Practice Social Distancing Brushing your Teeth.** It's always a good idea to have one person at a time at the sink. Bacteria from your mouth enter the air as you brush your teeth. Stand back from others as you brush.
- 7. When should I change my toothbrush?** Replace your toothbrush if you get sick and replace it with a new one when you recover from a viral or bacterial infection.
- 8. Contact your Dentist with Questions or Concerns.**

We understand that being pregnant is not always easy and that it affects women in different ways, so be kind to yourself.

We hope by following our simple and healthy tips they will help you and your baby during this time. We also have lots more information available on our website www.dentalhealth.ie to guide you on how to look after your baby's oral health once they are born.

Healthy Teeth for Life!

The Dental Health Foundation is Ireland's leading charitable trust advocating for oral health in Ireland. We empower pregnant women to make healthy choices that can positively affect their oral and general health and their baby's development, as an important step towards a healthy pregnancy.