

Oral Health and Women

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[Kathy Maddox] Welcome to this CDC women's health podcast about oral health. I'm your host, Kathy Maddox. Routine dental care is important for women across their lifespan. As a woman ages, her body undergoes many changes that can impact her oral and overall health. Dr. Gina Thornton-Evans, with CDC's Division of Oral Health, is joining me today to talk about the importance of oral health during pregnancy. Welcome, Dr. Thornton-Evans.

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Thank you, Kathy.

[Kathy Maddox] Dr. Thornton-Evans, tell us why pregnant women are at particular risk for oral health problems.

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Kathy, pregnancy results in hormonal changes that may increase inflammation and infection in the mouth. Women who are pregnant may experience red, swollen, and bleeding gums, known as pregnancy gingivitis. Pregnancy gingivitis is a form of periodontal disease, which if left untreated may lead to a more severe form of periodontal disease, known as periodontitis, commonly called gum disease.

[Kathy Maddox] What can happen if a woman gets periodontal disease?

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Periodontal disease can lead to tooth loss later in life. There is also evidence to suggest that periodontal disease may also be associated with poor pregnancy outcomes, such as preterm birth, low birth weight, gestational diabetes, and preeclampsia, which is characterized by high blood pressure. So, women who have had these conditions should pay close attention to their oral health and discuss concerns with their health care provider.

[Kathy Maddox] How common is periodontal disease in pregnant women?

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Periodontal disease, specifically pregnancy gingivitis is very common among pregnant women, especially among low-income women and members of some racial and ethnic minority groups. Socioeconomic factors, having the resources to pay for care, ability to access care, and receiving timely dental care, along with understanding the importance of oral health all influence having a healthy mouth.

[Kathy Maddox] So, what should women do to prevent having pregnancy-related problems with their teeth and gums?

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Women who are planning to become pregnant should visit their dentist and get any needed preventive or treatment-related dental care. Pregnant women should practice good daily oral hygiene like everyone else, including brushing, flossing,

eating healthy foods, not smoking, and visiting their dentist. Brushing and flossing every day can reverse gingivitis, the body's response to the sticky, bacterial plaque that constantly forms on teeth that can lead to severe periodontal disease. Also, fluoride in toothpaste and drinking water help prevent tooth decay. Cigarette smoking, already known as a risk factor for poor birth outcomes, cancer, and heart disease, is also a strong risk factor for periodontal disease.

[Kathy Maddox] What are some myths regarding oral health and pregnancy?

[Gina Thornton-Evans] There are a number of myths or misconceptions regarding the teeth during pregnancy. Some women believe that they will lose a tooth with each pregnancy. Some think that the baby depletes their calcium in their bodies, leading to weaker teeth. Others believe they shouldn't see a dentist until after the pregnancy is over. However, all of these are myths and are not true. Pregnant women need to include oral health care as part of their prenatal care. Each expectant mother should ask about dental care during pregnancy, whether she is visiting a dental or obstetric health care provider.

[Kathy Maddox] What's being done to help educate and inform women and health care providers about the importance of oral health?

[Gina Thornton-Evans] Some state health departments have successfully included for dental care as part of their overall prenatal care. New York State Department of Health published guidelines regarding oral health during pregnancy for women and health care providers. More information on these guidelines can be found at www.health.state.ny.us.

[Kathy Maddox] Thank you, Dr. Thornton-Evans, for explaining the importance of good oral health care for all women, especially those who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. For more information on oral health, please visit www.cdc.gov/oralhealth. For more information on women's health, visit www.cdc.gov/women. For CDC, I'm Kathy Maddox.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.