Oral Health: Keeping Your Mouth Clean and Healthy

Why does having a healthy mouth matter?

Keeping your mouth clean and healthy is an important part of having a healthy body. Over time, your teeth build up plaque and bacteria that cause irritation to the gums. These plaques can cause infection in your gums and the bones that support your teeth. This is called periodontal disease. Having periodontal disease can cause other problems in your body. You have a greater chance of having a stroke, heart problems, or a heart attack if you have periodontal disease. You are more likely to have trouble controlling your blood sugar if you have diabetes and periodontal disease. The good news is that you can easily keep your mouth free of disease by following the steps on the chart on the next page.

How does mouth health affect pregnancy?

The health of your mouth can affect your baby. The extra hormones in your body when you are pregnant increase the chance that you will have changes or develop disease in your gums. Studies show that having periodontal disease may slightly increase the chance that your baby will be born small and/or born early. Your chance of having blood pressure problems also may be higher.

What are the signs that I might have periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease may not cause pain or other obvious symptoms that something is wrong. You should see a dental care provider if you have any of these signs, because they could mean that you have periodontal disease:

- You have pain in your mouth.
- Your teeth hurt when you have hot or cold food or drink.
- Your gums bleed when you brush your teeth.
- You have bad breath.
- You have loose, missing, or chipped teeth.
- You have trouble chewing or eating your food.
- You have bumps or sores in your mouth that don't go away.
- Your gums are swollen and red.
- You have clicking or pain in your jaw.

Can I have dental care while I am pregnant?

You should be seen by your dentist if you have any of the signs on the list above. Most dental care is safe while you are pregnant. Dental x-rays, routine cleaning, and root canals can all be done when you are pregnant. Many antibiotics and pain medicines also are safe to use while you are pregnant. Talk to your prenatal health care provider before you have a dental procedure if you have questions or are unsure whether it is safe.

How do I prevent periodontal disease?

The flip side of this handout lists the things you can do to keep your mouth healthy.

© 2011 by the American College of Nurse-Midwives

How do I keep my mouth clean and healthy?
• Brush your teeth at least twice a day. Use toothpaste with fluoride. • Brush with a soft-bristle toothbrush so your gums are less irritated. • Change your toothbrush every 3 months.
• Floss at least once a day. This keeps plaque and bacteria from building up on your teeth.
• Use warm salt-water rinses if your gums hurt. Mix 1 cup of water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Swish the liquid in your mouth for 1 or 2 minutes, then spit it out.
• Chew gum containing xylitol 3 or 4 times a day to kill the bacteria in your mouth.
• Have your teeth cleaned and checked by a dental health professional at least once a year. This gets rid of the plaque and bacteria that can build up on your teeth and cause disease. • See a dental care provider as soon as possible if you have any of the signs that you might have a problem with your mouth.
• Stop smoking and drink little or no alcohol. Both of these habits increase the chance that you will have disease of your mouth and increase your chance of having other major health problems.
• Eat healthy foods.
• Avoid drinking sodas and eating too many sweets.
• Exercise at least 5 times a week for 30 minutes. Keep your weight healthy.

For More Information

- The American Dental Association: Pregnancy
  http://www.ada.org/2730.aspx#faq

- healthfinder.gov: Oral Health
  http://www.healthfinder.gov/Scripts/searchContext.asp?topic=603