

# Oral Health & Pregnancy

*"Recent studies point to associations between oral infections... and pre-term, low-weight births"*



## Oral Health in Wisconsin — A Fact Sheet

### What is the public health issue?

Oral health is integral to general health.<sup>2</sup> There is now evidence suggesting that oral health, particularly gum disease, may have an impact on the occurrence of preterm births, resulting in low birth weight babies. Pregnant women with periodontal (gum) disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that's born too early and too small.<sup>3</sup> The exact connection between poor oral health and preterm birth is unknown. It is thought that periodontal disease may lead to premature birth by the bacteria in the mouth spreading to the placenta or amniotic fluid, and also that systemic inflammation caused by periodontitis may lead to preterm labor and membrane rupture.<sup>4</sup> The likely problem is a chemical found in oral bacteria called prostaglandin, which can induce labor and which occurs in very high levels in severe cases of periodontal disease.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there are certain oral problems that affect pregnant women specifically. About half of women experience pregnancy gingivitis, beginning in the second or third month of pregnancy that increases in severity throughout the eighth month. This condition can be uncomfortable and cause swelling, bleeding, redness or tenderness in the gum tissue.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, gums swollen by pregnancy gingivitis can react strongly to irritants and form large growths, called "pregnancy tumors", which are not cancerous and are generally painless. If a tumor persists, it may require removal by a dentist.<sup>2</sup> It is very important for pregnant women to maintain their oral health.

### Improving Oral Health Before and During Pregnancy

- ✓ Drink fluoridated water.
- ✓ Brush your teeth and gums twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and floss each day.
- ✓ Make an appointment with a dental provider.
- ✓ Make good nutritional choices; limit sweet drinks and avoid refined sugar.
- ✓ Include Vitamin C and Calcium in your daily diet.
- ✓ Quit smoking.
- ✓ Get plenty of rest.
- ✓ Learn how to take care of the baby's gums and teeth now.

#### In the United States<sup>1</sup>:

- ✓ The rate of preterm births is 12.8%.
- ✓ The low birthweight rate is 8.3%.
- ✓ Babies born early are at an increased risk for health problems.

#### Infant/Toddler Oral Health Tips

- ✓ Consult a pediatrician, family physician or dentist on the most appropriate water to use with econstituted infant formula.
- ✓ Start oral care early; begin wiping the baby's gums with a cloth or gauze each day and start brushing as soon as the first tooth appears.
- ✓ Supervise the child's brushing.
- ✓ Try to schedule the child's first dental visit around his or her first birthday.

### What is the impact of premature birth in the U.S.?

Births are considered preterm when they occur before 37 weeks gestation.<sup>4</sup> Preterm births can result in both low birth weight (LBW), less than 2,500 grams or 5.5 pounds, and very low birth weight (VLBW) babies, a weight of less than 1,500 grams or 3.3 pounds.<sup>6</sup> Premature birth and low birthweight babies significantly contribute to the incidence of infant mortality, accounting for 70% of prenatal deaths in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> Disorders related to short gestation and low birth weight were the second leading cause of infant death in 2004, affecting 4.6% of babies.<sup>7</sup> Premature births have soared to become the number one obstetric problem in the United States<sup>3</sup>, and the percentage of LBW infants has increased by 36% since 1990 when it was 5.8%.<sup>8</sup> Many premature babies come into the world with serious health problems, and those who survive may suffer life-long consequences.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, LBW infants suffer from numerous health complications.

## Myth vs. Fact

There are many myths about dental health and pregnancy. Preparing for a new family member is an exciting and busy time. It is important that during pregnancy moms visit their dentist regularly and take especially good care of their teeth and gums.

### Is it safe for pregnant women to go to the dentist?

It is not only safe for pregnant women to visit their dentist it is an integral part of ensuring a healthy pregnancy. Hormone fluctuations during pregnancy can affect the gum tissue, making it red, inflamed and sore, a condition called pregnancy gingivitis. This can be made even worse by plaque and bacteria that has accumulated along the gumline and between the teeth. Generally preventive treatments like dental cleanings are recommended after the first trimester of pregnancy and will help to keep gums healthy.

### What if I have a dental emergency and need x-rays?

It is always best to check with your medical provider for his/her recommendations and guidelines regarding additional dental procedures. However untreated dental decay or infection can pose a risk to you and your baby. Radiation from taking x-rays is very low and dental health professionals are trained to take every precaution to minimize any risk. Dental radiographs are not contraindicated if one is trying to become pregnant or is breast feeding.

### If I have morning sickness or lots of indigestion during pregnancy can it affect my teeth?

Yes, excessive vomiting due to morning sickness and the acids related to indigestion can harm your teeth. Acids from the stomach can remove minerals from tooth enamel and cause decay. Your dental health professional may give you a prescription strength topical fluoride or recommend an over the counter fluoride rinse to use during pregnancy. Topical fluorides have been proven effective in reducing decay.

### Is it true that an unhealthy mouth can impact the health of my baby?

There is some evidence suggesting oral health, particularly gum disease, may have an impact on the occurrence of preterm births, resulting in low birth weight babies. The exact connection between poor oral health and preterm birth is unknown.

### If I crave sweets during my pregnancy what can I do to keep my teeth healthy?

Eating sweets and snacking more often between meals can cause dental decay. It is important to limit sweets to mealtime and choose healthy snacks between meals. Brushing twice daily with a fluoride toothpaste, flossing at least once daily and visiting your dental health professional regularly will ensure healthy teeth and gums before, during and after pregnancy.

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