

This is the first in a series of articles about different aspects of dental health for you and your family at each stage of life.

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Let's start at the very beginning – even before a baby! If you are planning a pregnancy it is important that mum's mouth is in excellent health. This will help teeth and gums to best cope with the changes that pregnancy hormones bring and to give baby the very best start in their own dental health. Did you know that the adult teeth, as well as the baby teeth, are already growing in the jaws when a baby is born? Habits that ensure teeth and gums are healthy reduce the risk of preventable dental diseases such as tooth decay, gum disease and oral cancer in both mother and baby.

So, how to keep your mouth healthy?

- Brush your teeth for 2 minutes twice a day. Use a fluoride-containing toothpaste, spit out the excess at the end but don't rinse. Clean between your teeth regularly using either floss, flossettes or interdental brushes. Pregnancy hormones can make the gums more prone to bleeding on brushing but this can be minimised with proper cleaning. The dental hygienist can help you with correct technique and the most suitable products for you to use at home.
- Reduce the frequency of sugary snacks between mealtimes. Drink plenty of water and use sugar free chewing gum. Try and keep pregnancy cravings to safe snacks such as nuts and cheese. This can be a challenge with morning sickness but aim for savoury foods if possible.
- If sickness is a problem rinse your mouth with plain water to reduce the damage done to teeth by stomach acids. Leave an hour before brushing to allow acids to become neutralised – otherwise the enamel of your teeth can literally be brushed away.
- Give up smoking – seek help from your GP. This will ensure your gums are healthier, reduce your risk of mouth cancer and ensure your baby is healthier.
- Visit your dentist before planning a pregnancy and inform them that a baby may be on the horizon. Your dentist may update x-rays to help spot any early problems developing with your teeth and reduce the risk of needing treatment whilst you are pregnant. You may be recommended to have a professional clean of your teeth to remove any deposits that lead to gum problems. Most importantly your dentist and hygienist can advise you personally on prevention which will then help you through your pregnancy.

Healthy teeth and gums look better and feel better, help a healthier pregnancy and give the very best start to baby's dental health.

Next time: Babies, toddlers and pre-school children