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DENTAL ASSOCIATION

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**Woman and
Oral Health**

August is Women's Month, which makes it the perfect time to learn more about the connection between hormones and women's oral health. Women have unique oral health concerns. Fluctuating hormone levels during menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and menopause can raise the risk for potential problems in the mouth, teeth, or gums. Systemic diseases such as diabetes can also affect oral health. Regular brushing, flossing, and dentist visits can help prevent disease in your mouth and the rest of your body.

Puberty

As the process of puberty begins, hormones such as Oestrogen and Progesterone increase blood flow to the gums which can lead to redness, bleeding and swelling. Furthermore, microbial changes in the mouth may result in certain destructive bacteria being present in the mouth of pubescent women, often causing gingivitis, cavities and bad breath. It is therefore especially important that during these times, adolescent women are especially thorough when brushing and flossing every day in order to prevent gum disease.

Menstruation

As with puberty, hormonal fluctuations before and during menstruation also cause gingival swelling and possible bleeding with brushing and flossing. Prior to their period, some women may become susceptible to canker sores due to an increased mucosal lining of the

mouth. During a woman's menstrual cycle, she may also experience a decrease in saliva, causing symptoms such as a dry mouth and bad breath. Women are encouraged to rinse at least once daily with a non-alcoholic mouthwash if they are experiencing any such symptoms and maintain a strict regimen when it comes to brushing and flossing.

Pregnancy

Again, due to the abundance in oestrogen and progesterone during pregnancy, it is common for pregnant women to develop "pregnancy gingivitis," an inflammation of the gums and surrounding tissues characterized by redness, swelling, tenderness and bleeding. If left untreated, this may progress to periodontitis, an infection of the tissues which hold the teeth in place, which may then increase the risk of pregnant women having pre-term, low-birth-weight babies. Thus, professional cleanings at the dentist are vital during pregnancy to keep such conditions at bay, along with maintaining good oral health habits and a diet low in sugar.

When visiting a dentist during pregnancy, tell your doctor that you are pregnant so that routine dental x-rays that are not absolutely necessary may be avoided. It is advisable to schedule your dental examination and regular dental cleaning early in pregnancy to determine if any conditions exist that may require treatment.

Menopause

Menopause leads to a rapid decline in oestrogen levels. These hormonal changes may also place women at risk for osteoporosis, which may lead to bone loss in the jaw and thus possible tooth loss. Women can prevent the oral health effects of osteoporosis by following nutritious eating habits that include plenty of calcium and vitamin D, and discuss proper treatment options with a doctor and dentist. The low oestrogen levels may also lead to a decrease in the levels of saliva in the mouth, in turn increasing the risk for dry mouth, cavity formation and bad breath. This may also be accompanied by burning and altered taste sensations in the mouth. It is of utmost importance that women experiencing such symptoms discuss them with their doctor and dentist to ensure that appropriate treatment may be put in place.

Oral Contraception

Women using oral contraceptives should inform their dentist since the hormone levels in these contraceptives, especially that of progesterone, will lead to increased blood flow to the gums, thereby increasing the risk for gingivitis.

Hormones are a fact of life, but they don't have to interfere with a woman's ability to maintain a healthy smile at every age and stage of life. Women can maintain their oral health through good oral health habits like brushing, flossing, regularly visiting the dentist and following a healthy diet.