Womens Wellness and Oral Health
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Women's Wellness and Oral Health

Oral health and general health are directly linked. Women have some different oral health needs than men. Changes in hormone levels can have a strong effect on a woman’s gums. Certain medical conditions affect the mouths of women more often than men. Advertising and social pressures may influence behaviours that have a negative effect on women’s oral health.

Tips for a Great Smile

Good oral hygiene is essential during the different stages of a women’s life.

• Brush your teeth at least twice a day to remove plaque.
• Use fluoridated toothpaste.
• Make sure you brush before going to sleep.
• Use a soft bristle toothbrush or powered toothbrush.
• Brush all of the inside, outside and chewing surfaces of your teeth.
• Use a few gentle strokes to clean your tongue.
• Floss once a day to clean between teeth and under gums.
• If your gums bleed when brushing or flossing do not stop. This is a sign that you need to actually brush and massage along the gumline more.
• Avoid or limit sugary foods and drinks to reduce the risk of tooth decay, poor nutrition and other health problems.
• Chew sugarless gum if you chew gum.
• Visit your dental care professional for regular preventive care.
The Hormone Link

Hormones in women change a lot during life:

- Puberty
- Monthly periods
- Pregnancy
- Using birth control pills/patches/injections
- Menopause

Inflammation of the gums, known as gingivitis, is related to changes in hormone levels. Gingivitis occurs as the increase in certain hormones causes a more severe reaction to germs (bacterial plaque). Some germs increase in the mouth, or change in type when hormones increase.

Puberty

- The surge in hormones may cause sensitive or swollen gums. Gums may look puffy; like a balloon. This occurs in areas of the mouth where food, plaque and tarter (calculus) are present.
Menstruation

• The monthly rollercoaster of hormones also affects your mouth.
• Some women complain of swollen and bleeding gums just prior to their period.
• Cold sores (herpes labialis) and canker sores (aphthous ulcers) occur in some women more frequently during their monthly period.
• Some women have food cravings related to changes in their hormones. If you crave sweets try chewing sugarless gum, sipping water or snacking on fruit and vegetables.

Contraception

• Contraceptives (birth control pills, patches and injections) cause the body to imitate pregnancy. This results in a change in the normal amount of hormones.
• When using the above contraceptives, gingivitis is common. The reaction is an over response by the gums to plaque, caused by a change in hormones. The hormone change may also allow certain bacteria to increase in numbers in the mouth.
• Women using birth control pills are more likely to develop a “dry socket” after tooth extraction. This is a very severe, painful infection. Your dentist can lower the risk of a dry socket by knowing if you are using birth control pills. Based on your pill cycle they can advise you of best time to have the extraction.
• It is important to share information regarding birth control pills with dental professionals when a health history is taken. Don’t worry if your family or partner doesn’t know because health information is confidential and will not be shared with others.
Pregnancy

Changes to oral health

• Changes in hormones in pregnancy cause the gums to react more to plaque.
• Not removing plaque by brushing and flossing increases your risk for pregnancy gingivitis.
• About 10% of women get soft, round growths of tissue called Pregnancy Tumours.
• They usually start forming in the first trimester.
• They are often found on the gums between teeth.
• They are not cancerous and usually go away on their own after delivery.
• If a growth does not heal, see your dentist.

Dental care and pregnancy

A healthy mouth can help both mother and baby

• Dental care, such as preventing and treating periodontal disease can help you have a healthier pregnancy.
• Periodontal disease is linked to inflammation and chronic infection. Research studies show a link between chronic periodontal disease and poor pregnancy outcomes. Keeping your mouth healthy may reduce the risk of having a pre-term or low birth weight baby.
• The second trimester of pregnancy (middle three months) is the best time to receive regular dental care.
• Be sure to inform the dental office staff that you are pregnant.
• X-rays should be limited. If x-rays are needed a lead apron will be provided to shield mother and baby from the low dose of radiation.
Vomiting

- Frequent vomiting can damage your teeth. Stomach acids can breakdown the enamel of the teeth.
- After vomiting it is best to rinse the mouth so acids cannot soften the teeth. You can use water, a fluoride rinse, or mix baking soda and water together which will neutralize the acid. Wait 30 minutes before toothbrushing.
- If you experience a lot of nausea, tip your head forward over the sink when toothbrushing, and use a toothbrush with a small head to reduce gagging.

Nutrition

- A nutritious diet benefits the general health and oral health of mother and baby.
- Children can have malformed or defective tooth enamel leading to cavities if the mother does not have a healthy balanced diet.
- In addition to eating healthy foods, it is important to brush frequently especially if you are snacking more often. Try to select healthy snacks that are low in sugar and won’t stick to the teeth. Some examples include cheese, raw vegetables, yogurt or a whole grain bagel.
Menopause

- Menopause means the end of menstrual periods due to less hormone production. The reduction in hormones causes changes in the body including the mouth.
- Along with hot flashes some women experience problems with their mouths including; pain, a dry mouth, burning mouth or changes in taste.
- Menopausal women also may have changes to their gums. Gums may become dry, shiny, bleed easily and range in colour from very pale to very red and existing gum disease get worse.
- Changes to hormone levels also increase the risk for developing autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, see page 15 and osteoporosis, see page 16.
Lifestyle Choices

Oral Piercing

• Oral piercing has become a popular form of self-expression.
• Some women are pressured to pierce, especially their tongues, to please their partners.
• The decision to pierce should not be taken lightly and should not be done to satisfy someone else’s desires.
• Piercing the tongue, lips and cheeks can be painful and cause serious and possibly fatal infections.
• If possible discuss piercing with a dental care professional before you make the final decision. Be aware of all the dental and health risks.
• If you decide to go ahead with piercing then use a studio that is inspected by your local health department. If you call Durham Health Connection line a public health inspector will provide a list of inspected establishments in your area.
• Only use plastic balls so you don’t chip your teeth.
• Learn how to keep the piercing clean to lower your risk of infection.
• Try not to “play” with the stud.

Risks of Oral Piercing Include:

• Contracting blood borne diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS
• Serious infection of the piercing site
• Choking on the jewellery
• Allergic reactions to the metals
• Injury to the gums
• Chipped teeth
• Difficulty eating and speaking
• Changes in the taste of food
**Tobacco Use**

Keep your mouth and body healthy, avoid tobacco.

- One of the keys to a healthy mouth as well as a healthy body is not using tobacco. All forms of tobacco are dangerous, including cigarette, smokeless tobacco and marijuana.
- Tobacco contains many toxic chemicals.
- Use of tobacco increases the risk for heart disease, stroke, pregnancy complications, lung diseases and cancer.
- Tobacco also contributes to many oral problems such as:
  - Gum disease
  - Tooth loss
  - Halitosis (bad breath)
  - Poor healing in the mouth
  - Oral cancer

**Tobacco Manufacturers are Targeting Products to Women**

- A serious concern is that while fewer people are smoking, more young women are now starting to smoke.
- Tobacco manufacturers are increasing their marketing of tobacco products to women, especially young women.
- Designer cigarettes and flavoured smokeless tobacco are promoted to women as ways to be glamorous, slim or independent. Some examples include:
  - Slim cigarettes
  - Flavoured cigarettes known as Bidis
  - Snus; a smokeless, no spit tobacco and e-cigarettes
- The ugly truth; tobacco is highly addictive, costs money, negatively affects health, helps cause early aging, bad breath, stained teeth and fingers.
Tobacco and Pregnancy Do Not Mix

• Smoking during pregnancy is a serious risk to both the mother and the unborn child.
• Pregnant women with periodontal disease that use tobacco products are at greater risk for a preterm baby or other pregnancy complications.
• Smoking during pregnancy has been linked to babies being born with cleft lip or cleft palate.
• While some women quit smoking during pregnancy, some do not, and many return to smoking after the baby is born. Second-hand smoke will also put your baby at risk.
• Successful quitting generally requires a lot of support. Speak with your doctor, dental care professional or call Durham Health Connection Line.
Health Conditions and Womens Oral Health

Eating Disorders

• Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are very serious health issues for women.
• Eating disorders may lead to nutritional deficiencies that affect the health and appearance of the mouth. Some symptoms may include; pale tissues, a burning mouth and cracks at the corners of the mouth.
• If binging involves sugary food and sweetened drinks cavities may increase.
• Self induced vomiting can cause damage to the teeth. Acid from the stomach softens teeth and can erode the enamel. This usually happens on the inside of the front teeth. This can cause pain and breaking of the teeth.
• Women who binge and vomit frequently often have a dry mouth and swollen glands around their face.
• The palate and throat may become red if vomiting is forced.

If you have an eating disorder and vomit:
• Use a baking soda rinse before tooth brushing to neutralize the acid that damages teeth.
• Use a soft toothbrush.
• Practise excellent oral hygiene.
• Talk to your dental care professional as home fluoride treatments may be recommended.
Stress and Depression

More women are treated for depression than men. Women also report they are under stress more often than men.

Medication and Dry Mouth

• Medications to treat depression and anxiety can cause dry mouth.
• Discuss any prescription medications with your pharmacist and inform your dental care provider of any medications you are taking.
• A dry mouth can lead to more cavities.
• If your mouth is dry limit sugary foods and drinks.
• Sip on water throughout the day.
• Chew sugarless gum to stimulate saliva.
• Don’t suck on hard candies.
• Saliva substitutes may be needed.
• Your dental care professional may recommend additional fluoride for home use.
Bruxism

• Bruxism is clenching or grinding of the teeth. Grinding often happens at night and clenching during the day. There are a number of causes but stress, tension and anxiety may be triggers. More women than men are treated for problems with their jaw joints and headaches due to bruxism.

• Signs of bruxism include:
  • Teeth grinding
  • Teeth that are worn or chipped
  • Jaw pain and sometimes difficulty opening the mouth
  • Sore face muscles
  • Dull frequent headaches
  • Sore or sensitive teeth

• A special mouth appliance or medications may be required if grinding is causing damage to the teeth or jaws, or if facial pain is affecting daily living.

Poor Oral Hygiene

• Depression may result in less self care leading to poor oral hygiene and increased risk for cavities and gum disease.

• Good oral hygiene prevents disease and can help make you feel happier.
Rheumatoid Arthritis

- Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disease that causes inflammation of the joints of the body.
- It often starts between age 30 to 50 and affects women three times more often than men.
- The jaw joint may be affected making it difficult to open the mouth.
- As fingers, hands or wrists are affected brushing and flossing may be difficult due to pain or limited movement.
- A recent study has found that severe rheumatoid arthritis improves in people who undergo treatment for their periodontal disease.

Sjogren’s Syndrome

- Sjogren’s syndrome is an autoimmune disorder of the salivary ducts. It occurs most often in menopausal women.
- This results in a very dry mouth, thick saliva and changes to the surface of the tongue. Saliva substitutes can help keep the mouth moist.
- Fluoride may also be recommended by a dental professional to help prevent tooth decay.

Lichen Planus

- This is a condition that affects the tissues in the mouth. It affects women twice as often as men.
- The inside of the cheeks are where it usually appears. It can also be found on the tongue, lips, gums, palate or floor of the mouth.
- It usually looks like fine, raised threadlike lesions.
- Times of stress are when it emerges.
Osteoporosis

• Osteoporosis is a disease that affects bones making them weaker.
• Women are much more likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis (80% vs. 20%) than men. After menopause a women’s risk for osteoporosis increases.
• Osteoporosis can cause bone loss in the jaws as well as the body. Existing gum disease may become worse, teeth may loosen and dentures may not fit.
• Some people are prescribed medication (bisphosphonates) for the treatment of osteoporosis. It is important to discuss the use of these medications with your dentist, especially before any dental surgery.
• The risk for osteoporosis can be reduced by:
  • Not smoking
  • Not being too thin
  • Limiting alcohol
  • Eating a diet rich in calcium (milk, cheese, yogurt, broccoli and almonds) and vitamin D
  • Taking these nutrients as supplements if advised by a health professional

Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)

• Research has linked having periodontitis to increased risk for cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke).
• The research suggests the link is chronic inflammation from periodontitis and CVD.
• This is important for women as CVD is the leading killer of women in North America.
• Preventing or reducing the severity of periodontal disease may improve cardiovascular health.
Do’s and Don’ts for Keeping Your Mouth Healthy & Smile Beautiful

**DO**

- Schedule regular dental check-ups and preventive care.
- Eat a healthy diet and limit sugary food and drinks.
- Talk with your dental professional about any changes in your mouth such as appearance, colour, taste, lumps or chipping of teeth.
- Discuss any symptoms such as pain, bleeding, infection, or sore jaws.
- Talk with your dental care professional about any general health concerns or medications you are taking.
- If you are a past or current tobacco user tell your dental professional.
- If you have an eating disorder contact a health professional who can work with you to manage the cause.
- See a health care professional if stress, anxiety or depression is affecting your life. Find healthy ways to relieve stress such as exercise and talking with supportive friends and family.

**DON’T**

- Smoke or use any form of tobacco.
- Forget to brush and floss especially before bedtime.
- Ignore changes in your mouth like lumps, bleeding, swelling, or sudden bad taste.
- Eat sugary foods, drinks, candy or gum.
- Get oral piercings.
- Use your teeth to open bottles or packages.
A Special Message for Mothers of Infants and Toddlers

- Dental disease is an infectious disease.
- Babies are born without the bacteria that cause cavities. Women with periodontal disease or poor oral hygiene are more likely to pass bacteria to the mouths of their infants.
- Some ways to prevent passing germs from caregiver to child are:

**Do**
- Brush and floss regularly
- Chew sugarless gum with Xylitol

**Don’t**
- Share utensils or toothbrushes
- Lick or clean pacifiers with your mouth
- Prechew food for a child

Sugarless Gum with Xylitol

- Research has found that mothers who chewed sugarless gum, with Xylitol passed less cavity causing bacteria to the mouths of their children. These children had fewer cavities compared to other children whose mothers did not chew gum with Xylitol.
- Mothers had to chew the gum 2 to 3 times a day, from 3 months after delivery until the child was 24 months old.
- In the studies the amount of Xylitol ranged from 4 to 9 grams per day.
- The decrease in bacteria and cavities in the children lasted for five years after the women had stopped chewing the gum.
- At the time this brochure was written gum with a high enough amount of Xylitol was only available in Canada online or through health food stores, ask your dental care professional.
More Tips for Helping Children Develop a Healthy Smile

• Wipe the inside of babies mouth with a clean washcloth.
• Start brushing your child’s teeth as soon as they appear. Use a soft toothbrush. Do not use toothpaste until your child can spit out on their own.
• Brush your children’s teeth until they are at least 7 years old. Then supervise their toothbrushing to make sure they are doing a thorough job.
• Visit the dentist regularly. Babies should have a dental visit by their first birthday. Then visit as often as your dental professional recommends.
• Do NOT put your baby to bed with a bottle as it can lead to cavities.
• Sippy cups are no better than a bottle; when baby can sit up alone give him or her a cup to drink from.
• Always provide healthy meals and snacks at home and for school.
• Do not give pop or other sweetened drinks to children. Milk and real juice are best at mealtimes. Water is the best drink between meals.
Websites and Resources

Region of Durham
www.durham.ca – visit the Health Department Section for information on Oral Health and other topics of interest to women

Canadian Women’s Health Network
www.research.cwhn.ca

Health Canada
www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Women’s Health Matters created by Women’s College Hospital, Toronto
www.womenshealthmatters

Contact Information

Durham Health Connection Line
1-800-841-2729

Durham Oral Health Division
905-723-1365 or 1-800-853-1326

Telehealth Ontario
1-866-797-0000