

Oral Health During Pregnancy

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Pregnancy is a time of rapid change for a person's body. These changes impact the health of a pregnant person's mouth and teeth. This leads to questions about the safety of dental services, oral hygiene, and whether pregnancy causes teeth to fall out. Don't worry. Dental care is safe, and most pregnant people will not lose their teeth. In fact, taking care of the mouth and teeth, also known as oral health, can protect health for both the pregnant person and the baby.

What makes oral health different during pregnancy?

Changes in hormones during pregnancy affect your oral health. Higher hormone levels lead to increased blood flow. This can make the gums more sensitive, leading to swelling and tenderness. Hormone changes can also cause greater immune responses to bacteria in the mouth. Together, these changes can lead to common gum problems like gingivitis and periodontal disease.

Tooth erosion, tooth decay, and dryness of the mouth are some other common dental risks during pregnancy. Tooth erosion is the slow loss of the outer



part of the tooth, or enamel. The slow loss is caused by acids from food, drinks, or the stomach. Morning sickness can lead to tooth decay. Tooth decay is also known as cavities. Tooth decay occurs when plaque is left on the tooth for too long. Plaque is the sticky film of bacteria on the outer part of the tooth. Taking care of the mouth and teeth helps protect the pregnant person from these dental health problems. It can also lower the risk of dangerously high blood pressure known as preeclampsia, early preterm birth, and low birth weight.

Prevention: Oral health practices during pregnancy

Oral health problems can be prevented and managed by routine checkups and at-home habits. Dental visits during pregnancy are safe, beneficial, and recommended. Checkups with a dentist every six months are just as vital as exams with a health-care provider. Expert dental cleanings twice a year help stop plaque buildup and reduce gum disease risk. Fluoride treatments can help prevent tooth decay. Always let dental providers know that you are pregnant.

Talking with dental and health-care providers can help with decisions about dental treatments during pregnancy. Dental treatments like teeth whitening, amalgam (metal) fillings, and x-rays are safest after giving birth. Major procedures are often postponed

in the third trimester to avoid discomfort and reduce the risk of early labor. However, if a pregnant person has dental pain or an infection, immediate treatment is necessary. Special care can be taken to protect the pregnant person and growing baby.

At-home oral health habits are brushing your teeth twice a day and flossing in between teeth daily. Use a manual or electric toothbrush to brush gently in small circles. Angle the brush toward the gumline so it cleans in between the gums and teeth. Brush for two minutes. Do not forget to brush your tongue! Fluoride toothpaste is advised to strengthen and protect the tooth's outer surface. With morning sickness, rinse your mouth with water after throwing up to lower acidity in the mouth. Wait an hour after getting sick before brushing teeth to further protect the enamel. Reach out to a dental-care provider if more support is needed to manage oral health with morning sickness.

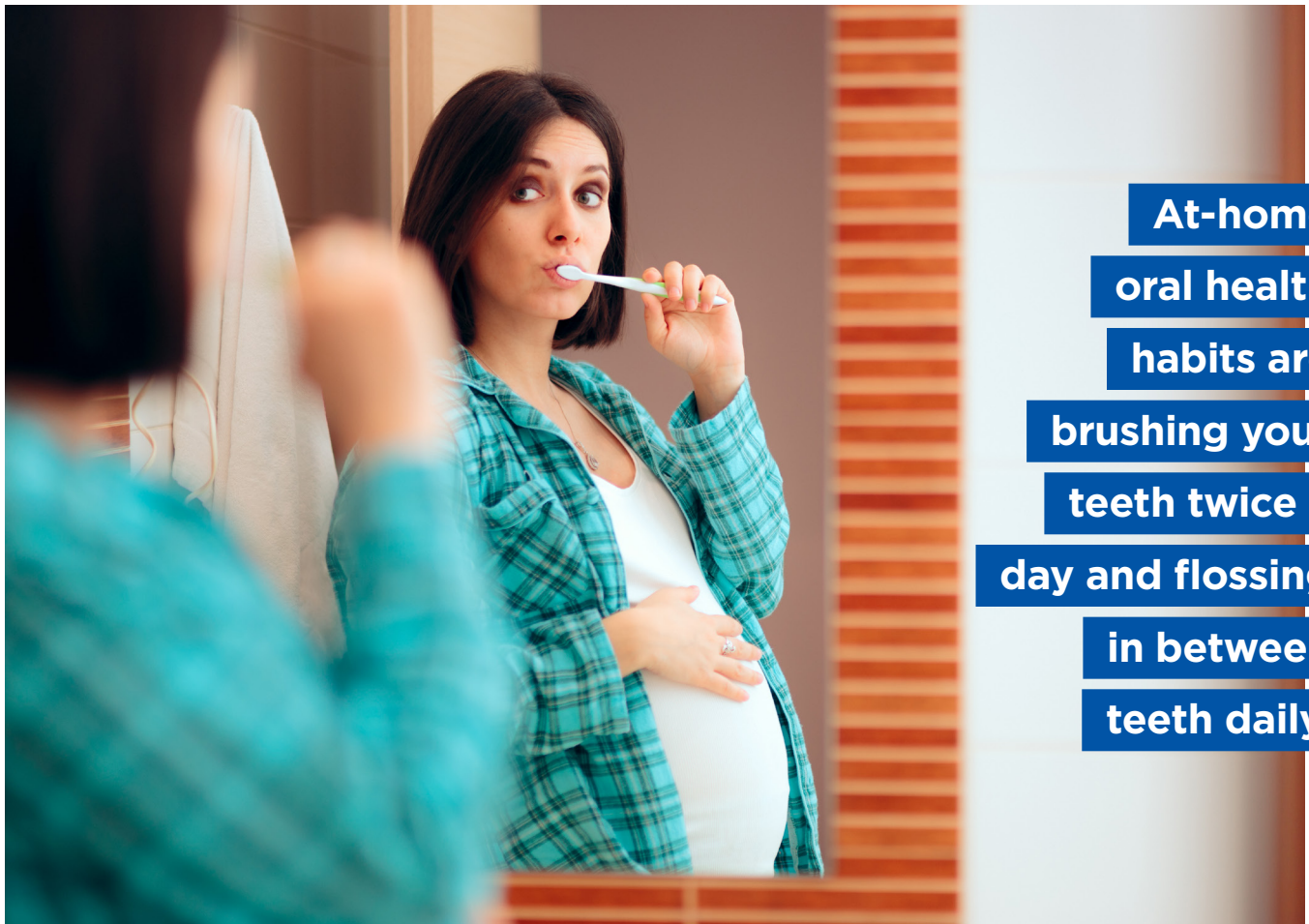


Table 1 - Important nutrients for oral health during pregnancy

Nutrient	How it helps oral health	Food examples
Vitamin C	Supports gum health through strong blood vessels and collagen production and supports a healthy immune system	Strawberries, blueberries, oranges, kiwi, green peppers, potatoes
Vitamin A	Helps saliva production and supports enamel formation	Sweet potato, pumpkin, carrots, spinach, lettuce, broccoli, cantaloupe, tomatoes, eggs, beef liver, milk with added vitamin A
Omega-3 fatty acids	Anti-inflammatory	Nuts, seeds, plant oils, like soybean or canola oil, and fish, like salmon, sardines, and herring
Calcium	Is a key part of the outer part of teeth that provides protection from cavities and supports strength and density of jawbone that stabilizes teeth and promotes growth and development of baby's jawbones and teeth	Yogurt, cow milk, fortified plant-based milk, greens, spinach, kale, tofu, sardines, fortified juices, and cereals
Vitamin D	Supports bone and tooth development	Salmon, trout, herring, sardines, mushrooms, fortified cow and plant-based milks, eggs, fortified cereals, and beef liver

(Adapted from the American Dental Association)

Prevention: Nutrition practices for oral health during pregnancy

Eating habits play a vital role in the oral and overall health of a pregnant person and the baby. In fact, a baby's teeth start to grow in the first trimester of pregnancy. The American Dental Association named nutrients vital for oral health during pregnancy and

supporting the growth of the baby's teeth. Table 1 shows some of the key nutrients, how they help oral health, and food sources of the nutrient. Keep in mind there are other nutrients that are important for the growth of the baby. These are folate, iron, choline, and others.

Experts advise getting nutrients from foods first. Foods have more nutrients than supplements. Many of these nutrients are better absorbed when eaten

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with other foods. Also, eating fibrous fruit and veggies can help scrape plaque off teeth. However, increased needs during pregnancy or not being able to handle certain foods might make it harder to get the recommended amounts. Prenatal vitamins are important for oral and overall health during pregnancy. Some vitamins have added sugar. If taking them at night, be sure to brush teeth after taking vitamins before going to bed. Reach out to a health-care provider with questions about which prenatal vitamins to take.

Too much sugar from food and drink can negatively impact dental health. Sugar feeds the bacteria in plaque and can lead to tooth decay and cavities. Be careful of some nutritious foods that might have a lot of added sugar. For example, cereal and yogurt have nutrients that support dental health. But some brands add flavor through added sugar. Check the food label and ingredients list for added sugars. Instead, try adding fruit to plain yogurt or whole-grain cereals.

Additional considerations during pregnancy include:

- Alcohol and tobacco are not safe during pregnancy.
- Limit caffeine to 200 milligrams a day or less. Two cups of home-brewed coffee, a can of soda, or four cups of unsweet iced tea each can have around 200 milligrams of caffeine.
- Water is the best choice to stay hydrated.
- To avoid the risk of dry mouth, try chewing sugar-free gum.
- To help morning sickness, try eating something right after waking. Eating frequent snacks and small meals throughout the day can also help but may increase the risk of cavities. Lower the risk by eating a mix of whole fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and plant and animal protein foods. Limit foods and drinks with added sugars.

What are the signs and symptoms of dental disease to look for?

Changes in the mouth and teeth are normal during pregnancy. Signs and symptoms can differ from person to person.

Some symptoms of dental disease to look for during pregnancy are:

- Gum swelling
- Bleeding
- Bright red or purple gums
- Mouth sores
- Tooth sensitivity or tenderness
- Dry mouth
- Food trapped between teeth

Reach out to a dental provider if you feel or see any of these. Do you need a dental-care provider? The Kentucky Dental Association’s “Find A Dentist” website is helpful. Visit <https://www.kyda.org/find-a-dentist.html>.

There are many changes during pregnancy that can impact oral and overall health. But preventive care is the same as it was before your pregnancy. Scheduled cleanings and daily oral hygiene are the best ways to prevent dental disease during pregnancy. Brushing your teeth twice a day, flossing daily, and eating a nutritious diet, can help protect teeth and baby from harm.

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