

PREGNANCY CONCERNS

Dear Dr McCrummen: I am pregnant and my gums bleed horribly. They are swollen, and now they ache and hurt to brush and floss. What can I do? L.W.

See your dentist as soon as possible, for your and your baby's sake. During pregnancy your hormone levels have changed and the body reacts differently to disease. Gum disease can take over fast and not only destroy gums, bone, and the support for your teeth, but it can affect your pregnancy and baby. All pregnant women are at risk. If their gums are painful or not, they should see their dentist at least twice during their pregnancy, and practice thorough oral hygiene care each day to help protect their baby.

Gum disease has been shown to increase the risk of preterm birth and abnormally low birth-weight babies, cause complications with diabetes, increase risks of heart disease, and it adversely affects many organs. Preterm birth can increase risks of death, and disabilities, such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, lung and gastrointestinal problems, and vision and hearing loss. A study done in 2003 showed an 84% reduction in preterm births in women that had their teeth cleaned, compared to those that didn't.

A pregnant woman can quickly develop "pregnancy tumors" on their gums. They usually need to be removed surgically, and often re-grow rapidly unless good oral health is maintained. They are usually seen as large, soft, red growths between the teeth that bleed very easily and are painful to touch and brush. Staying healthy can reduce the need for drugs that may adversely affect your baby.

It is recommended to have good oral health before pregnancy occurs. If planning on having a baby, have a thorough examination, a cleaning, and have all fillings done and disease treated before becoming pregnant. Another cleaning should be performed early in the second trimester. This recommendation is especially important for women that have already been diagnosed with periodontal disease. Treating abscesses, removing teeth, doing root canals, and taking the necessary drugs to control disease and pain can be risky, but necessary. Infection should be treated as soon as possible in any stage of pregnancy. If removal of wisdom teeth has been suggested it would be good to have that done before pregnancy.

In the "old days" women would often say they lost a tooth for each child, or that each child took the calcium in their jaw bones away. Gum disease is likely what caused it, not the child, from poor oral health and lack of care during a time they needed it the most. Pain, swelling, and bleeding is a later, more advanced stage of a dental problem. Help protect your baby and yourself by seeing your dentist, and doing your homework before and during your pregnancy. And, hopefully, continue to do so after and instill those good habits in your children.