Women’s Oral Health
May is Women’s Health Month

Good oral health habits help protect against tooth decay, gum disease and other oral health issues. However, women are more susceptible to changing hormone levels from puberty, certain types of birth control, pregnancy and menopause, and these hormone changes can impact oral health. May is Women’s Health Month, which makes it the perfect time to learn more about the connection between hormones and women’s oral health.

Puberty

Estrogen and progesterone hormones begin the process of puberty, triggering reactions in the gums that can lead to redness, bleeding and swelling of the mouth. Gums may react differently to germs and bacteria in the mouth of pubescent women and as a result can cause cavities and bad breath, along with gingivitis (gum inflammation characterized by redness, swelling, tenderness and bleeding). Canker sores and swollen salivary glands are also symptoms a woman may experience during her menstrual cycle. Maintaining good oral health habits and regularly visiting the dentist for cleanings and exams are key components to healthy gums and teeth in adolescent women.

Use of birth control

Women who use birth control pills, or oral contraceptives, should notify their dentist. Maintaining good oral health while taking this medication is crucial. Hormone levels in women using birth control pills, especially those containing progesterone, can increase blood flow to the gums. This heightens a woman’s risk for developing gum disease. Additionally, a dentist may prescribe antibiotics to help treat gum disease.

Pregnancy

At first glance, it may not seem like oral health has much to do with pregnancy, but maintaining good oral health is critical. A mother’s oral health can affect the overall health of her baby, so it’s important to pay close attention to dental care and any changes that may arise while pregnant.

An abundance of estrogen and progesterone are the culprits behind many dental related changes during pregnancy. Because of this increase in hormones, it’s common for pregnant women to develop “pregnancy gingivitis,” an inflammation of the gums and surrounding tissues characterized by redness, swelling, tenderness and bleeding. Gingivitis can lead to a more severe form of gum disease, which can increase the risk of pregnant women having pre-term, low-birth-weight babies. Professional cleanings will help keep conditions like gingivitis or gum disease in check along with maintaining good oral health habits like brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste and flossing daily, paying special attention to the gum line.

It is recommended to schedule a regular dental cleaning and exam early in pregnancy to determine if any conditions exist that may require treatment. The safest time for pregnant women to have X-rays or other dental
procedures is during the second trimester. Visiting the dentist regularly can help lower the risk for serious, ongoing health issues for a pregnant woman and her baby.

**Menopause**

It’s important for women experiencing menopause to pay special attention to their oral health. Post-menopausal women often experience dry mouth due to a decrease in saliva production. Saliva helps defend against periodontal (gum) disease and tooth decay as it washes food off teeth, neutralizes acids in the mouth, fights germs and prevents bad breath. Certain medications can increase the risk for dry mouth. Menopausal women should alert their dentist if they experience dry mouth.

The hormonal changes that occur during menopause can also increase a woman’s risk of osteoporosis, which is shown to cause bone loss in the body. Bone loss in the jaw increases the risk of 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.

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. This Women’s Health Month, take steps to improve your own oral health or encourage an important woman in your life to improve her oral health.