

Gum disease, pregnancy and your baby

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For most women, pregnancy is a natural part of life that leads to the birth of a healthy baby. Sometimes, however, women may have some problems during their pregnancy. These may cause their baby to have a low weight at birth, or to be born earlier than usual, or not to grow properly in the womb. Some pregnant women suffer from a serious problem called pre-eclampsia (very high blood pressure is one sign of this). Others sadly lose their baby because of a miscarriage or stillbirth.

Gum disease is one of the most common diseases seen in humans. In its most severe form, known as periodontitis, the gum tissue and bone that support the teeth are destroyed over time, leading to loss of teeth. Periodontitis affects about half of all adults and as many as 85% of people over 65-years of age.

Although diabetes and gum disease may seem like very different diseases, dentists have known for a long time that people with diabetes are more likely to get gum disease. Also, their gum disease may be worse and harder to treat, compared with people who do not have diabetes. If a person's blood sugar levels are under good control, however, gum treatment is more likely to be successful. But that's not the end of the story: scientists are now finding that gum disease may also have an effect on diabetes, making blood sugar control more difficult. It is clear and that keeping the gums healthy is an important part of looking after the overall health of a person with diabetes.

Possible causes of problem pregnancies

Doctors don't always understand why these sad events happen, but they think that infections and inflammation (part of your body's response to harm and injury) might be the cause in many cases. Infections could be caused by germs travelling to the womb from somewhere else in the body. One place germs could come from is the mouth.

We all have millions of germs living in our mouths, without doing us any harm. However, when you get gum disease, some of these germs can change and grow in number and cause an infection in your gums. This leads to the breaking down of the tissues and bone that support the teeth – we call this "periodontitis" or severe gum disease. When the gums are infected in this way, some germs can leak into the blood stream when you brush your teeth or bite down hard. If this happens in a pregnant woman, it could be one way for infection to reach the developing baby in the womb. This could then cause health problems for both mother and baby.

What we know about gum disease and problem pregnancies

To find out if having gum disease could really harm a pregnancy or baby, a group of top scientists recently looked closely at the results of all the research done in recent years. They found that there is a link between gum disease and three possible problems: having a baby with a low weight at birth, giving birth too early in the pregnancy, or having dangerously high blood pressure (pre-eclampsia) during pregnancy. This means that

having gum disease could slightly increase a woman's chance of one of these unwelcome pregnancy outcomes. Scientists think that germs and their products can travel through the blood from the site of gum disease to the womb. In fact, traces of germs from the mother's mouth have been found in the fluid around the baby and in blood inside the cord that links the baby to its mother. However, a lot more research is needed to prove a "cause and effect" link between gum disease and pregnancy problems. In addition, it is important to understand that there are many things that can affect the health of a woman and her unborn baby – for example, smoking, lifestyle choices and some medical conditions. Having gum disease does not mean that your baby will be harmed, but making sure that your mouth is healthy will give your baby the best chance of a good start.

Care of your gums during pregnancy

If you are planning to become pregnant, or already are, then you should get a check-up from your dentist to see if your gums are healthy. Your dentist can then pick up any early signs of gum disease and the dentist or hygienist can treat any disease you already have. He or she will also give you advice on how to look after your teeth and gums at home. Make sure you go back for regular check-ups, because being pregnant also makes it more likely that you will have gum problems, because of how your hormone levels change during pregnancy. Keeping your mouth healthy will help you and your unborn child to stay healthy.

You may also access videos from the organisers at www.perioworkshop.org

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