

Hormones and Oral Health

by Dr. Warren C. Edwards.

Everyday, more and more is learned about the connection between oral health and the body. Women experience unique hormonal fluctuations throughout their lives, which affect all parts of their bodies, including the mouth.

In the past, no one paid much attention to these changes and it was common for women to loose their teeth as they aged. Gingival sensitivity and bleeding from oral debris and plaque, occasional discomfort during the course of oral hygiene, tooth decay from dietary changes, periodontitis (gum disease) and bad breath are all influenced by the hormonal changes during adolescence, pregnancy, hormonal contraception and menopause. Compound these natural changes with the tendency women have to put the needs of others ahead of their own, as well as the ever-present time consuming demands of children, families, careers, and homemaking, and the foundation for dental problems is established.

During puberty, sex hormones (estrogen and progesterone) cause rapid changes in a female's body. Some of these changes are visible; others are not. In the mouth, this increase in sex hormones changes the way the gums respond to bacteria and make them more susceptible to infection. They may become very red and swollen, and can bleed, which are signs of periodontal or gum disease. The hormones continue to fluctuate during menstruation and many women are prone to aphthous ulcers (canker sores) and cold sores, which recur on a regular cycle.

Gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) is the most common oral concern during pregnancy. It occurs in 60 to 70 percent of all women who are pregnant. As with puberty and menstruation, the hormonal changes exaggerate the gum tissues response to bacterial plaque. Researchers have found a link between periodontal disease and preterm low birth weight babies. One recent study suggests that women who have periodontal disease are at a 7.5 time higher risk for delivering preterm low birth weight babies than women who do not have periodontal disease. It is extremely important that expectant mothers have a healthy mouth and see a dentist during their pregnancy. Diet can affect cavity formation, as well as the health of the developing baby. It is important to eat a healthy and well-balanced diet. For dry mouth that is some times experienced during pregnancy, frequent sips of water and sucking on sugarless candies may help.

Hormonal contraceptives, such as birth control pills, the ring, or the patch, mimic the effects of pregnancy on the body, so women using these, are susceptible to the same conditions as pregnant women, with regard to gum disease and bacterial plaque. In addition, women on hormonal contraceptives may be more prone to healing problems after tooth extraction leading to a "dry socket", which is a painful condition that can increase the likelihood of bone inflammation during the healing process. To help avoid

this condition, schedule any extractions during the non-estrogen “sugar pill” days (days 23-28) of the pill cycle or the week you are off the patch or the ring.

Menopause, a normal event in a woman’s life, also brings about certain changes in the mouth. The most common are irritation, changes in taste, and a dry mouth. After menopause, the decrease in hormones puts women at risk for developing osteoporosis, which may increase the risk of bone and tooth loss. Treatment to avoid this situation is currently undergoing review and should be discussed with your physician.

Women are subject to constant fluctuations in hormone levels throughout their lives. To avoid negative oral conditions associated with these hormonal changes, every woman should maintain good daily oral care by brushing at least twice a day and flossing daily. A dental professional should clean her teeth at least twice a year. Any specific needs or concerns can be discussed with her dentist at those times. Not long ago, it was a given that a woman would lose her teeth as she aged. This is no longer the case. Today, with a little education and long-term preventive measures, a woman can maintain all of her teeth well into her twilight years.

Dr. Chris Edwards practices general and cosmetic dentistry. His practice is Smile Design Center in Viera Fl. He can be reached for questions or consultations by calling 321-751-7775, or by e-mail through his web-site www.smiledesigncenter.us.

Dr. Edwards is the owner of Smile Design Center in Viera, Florida