

Women's Dental Health



Taking care of your teeth and gums is an important part of your general health care but many women aren't aware that the hormone changes occurring during their life put them at an increased risk of tooth and gum disease. Along with these hormonal changes, women also need to be aware of other lifestyle factors that contribute to their oral health such as smoking, diet, certain medications, pregnancy related issues and even sport.

Puberty

Puberty sees the onset of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone. These hormones fluctuate during the menstrual cycle and it's common for many women to experience changes in their gums at certain times of their cycle. Swollen, bleeding or sensitive gums are common but it's important to understand that bleeding gums are not normal or healthy. Menstruation gingivitis involves bleeding gums just before a period and while it usually subsides with the decrease in hormones after the period finishes, the underlying gingivitis remains. It's important to address this because gingivitis can lead to more damaging oral health problems such as periodontal disease which results in the loss of bone and eventually teeth.

Puberty can also see changes in diet and craving for sugary food. Again this is often related to hormone levels but the increase in high sugar foods has a direct impact on tooth decay. If you eat sugary foods, ensure you drink plenty of water, brush your teeth and chew sugarless gum to help increase saliva production and reduce the risk of plaque build up.

Menopause

The hormones involved in the reproductive cycle begin to decrease at the onset of menopause. As in puberty, these changes in hormone levels can cause oral health changes. Some women experience a dry or burning mouth, the gums can become sensitive and some women find they have persistent bad taste in their mouth. These are all normal symptoms which can usually be managed with good oral hygiene practices such brushing and flossing however regular preventive care visits with your hygienist will keep a check on your teeth and gums and ensure that you are not developing more concerning problems such as periodontal or gum disease.

The decrease in hormones can also lead to a decrease on bone density and while conditions such as osteoporosis usually involve a greater fracture risk to larger bones, the jaw bone can be affected. Osteoporosis alone is usually not responsible for the loss of teeth, however this thinning of the jaw bone combined with periodontal disease is a common cause of tooth loss in women.

Hormone replacement therapy is commonly used to alleviate some of the symptoms women experience during menopause and research indicates that it can be an effective way of slowing the bone thinning process of osteoporosis. It is important to discuss these issues with your GP and advise your dental team of any changes in your medical condition or the medications you are taking.

Pregnancy

The old wives' tale that says a woman loses a tooth for each pregnancy she has is not true, however pregnancy brings with it a surge in hormones and the oral health changes that follow. Many women find that their gums are more sensitive than normal and bleed when they brush. This is known as pregnancy gingivitis and usually settles after the first trimester. A preventive care visit will check the health of your gums to make sure there are no underlying gum disease issues. More regular preventive care visits during your pregnancy can also help to remove the plaque and calculus build up which irritates the gum tissues.

Nausea, reflux and vomiting are common during pregnancy and this causes the stomach acid to erode the tooth enamel. It is not recommended that you brush your teeth immediately after vomiting because you will actually cause further damage to the softened tooth enamel. Using a fluoride mouth rinse to neutralize the acid is more beneficial. Alternatively, water will also help to dilute to acid levels. Products such as Tooth Mousse can also be beneficial in helping to re-mineralize the tooth enamel and protect the teeth. Morning sickness often dictates the diet during pregnancy, but it is important to try and reduce further acid exposure by avoiding high sugar foods, soft drinks and citrus products.

If you are planning a pregnancy, it is advisable to have your dental check up and preventive care visit before you conceive. Gum disease, tooth decay and infection should all be treated before pregnancy because infected teeth and gums can have serious implications especially if you have other underlying medical complications. This includes impacted or infected wisdom teeth. If a problem occurs while you are pregnant, treatment may require x-rays, oral antibiotics, surgery and local anesthetic. While this can be done with minimal risk in most cases, it is best to avoid these things during pregnancy if possible. At Anzac Avenue Dental, we recommend waiting until after the baby is born before you have any x-rays, however in emergency situations we can x-ray the tooth using low dose digital x-ray and a full lead apron to reduce the risk of radiation exposure to the baby. A pre-pregnancy preventive care visit and dental examination is just as important as all the other pre-pregnancy checks you have done to reduce your risk of complications and improve your chance of having a healthy baby.

Bad breath

Bad breath is one of the most embarrassing social problems that people face, and eliminating it can prove to be more difficult than most people realize. Most people think that bad breath (halitosis) is caused by poor brushing. In some cases this is true, but for many people, it is a sign of a problem involving bacteria that collects at the back of the tongue, between the teeth and under the gums. Normal brushing alone doesn't always remove the bacteria and the end result is intermittent or ongoing bad breath.

Most bad breath originates from the mouth, mostly from the surfaces of the tongue, below the gum line, between the teeth and other hard to reach areas. The mouth is normally inhabited by bacteria and the balance between the different kinds of bacteria determines the quality of your breath. The over-growth of anaerobic (or smelly) bacteria can be stimulated by poor oral hygiene when food is not removed from between the teeth and in gum pockets, sulphur based antibiotics upset the balance of normal bacterial, coffee and acidic foods decrease the pH of the mouth and make it more acidic and hormonal changes including higher oestrogen levels can allow the bacteria to grow at a more rapid rate.

Good saliva flow also plays an important part in breath quality because it irrigates the mouth and flushes away debris. There are a number of things that can reduce saliva flow and these include mouth breathing and snoring, alcohol, some medications for high blood pressure, antihistamines and antidepressants, dehydration, stress and mouthwashes that contain alcohol also reduce saliva and dry the mouth.

The first step to eliminating bad breath is to have a regular examination and clean to ensure that your teeth and gums are healthy. Once this has been achieved, you can use products such as CloSYS II to eliminate the bacteria that causes the bad breath. CloSYS II actually kills the bacteria instead of just masking the smell with mouth rinses or chewing gums. CloSYSII contains chlorine dioxides and phosphates to kill the harmful bacteria and neutralize odor causing compounds. It is alcohol free and pH balanced so it does not dry the mouth like normal mouth rinses.

If you suffer from bad breath and you want a real solution, talk to your dentist or oral health therapist at your next visit. We can show you how they work and you can try some of the CloSYSII products.

Medications

There are a number of prescription medications that can interfere with your oral health. The birth control pill contains the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone so some women experience swollen or sensitive gums similar to what can be common during puberty or pregnancy. Women taking the pill are also at greater risk of a “dry socket” following a tooth extraction. While generally not serious, it can be very painful. If you are having a tooth extracted, discuss this with your dentist. Hormone replacement therapy can also has a similar effect to the birth control pill. A regular dental check will ensure there are no more serious underlying problems however some women will need to discuss their concerns with their GP and possibly look at changing the brand or dose of the hormone related medications.

Decreased saliva production is common as we age, however certain medications can speed up or interfere with this process and cause a dry mouth which in turn affects your oral health and makes you more susceptible to tooth decay and gum disease. Medications for heart conditions, allergies, depression, fluid retention, bladder problems and sedatives can all affect saliva production. It is important that you talk to you dentist about the medication you are taking because there are products available such as mouth rinses, Tooth Mousse and salivary substitutes that can be used.

Antibiotics are commonly used, however some types of antibiotics can alter the normal bacteria flora in your mouth and lead to changes in your oral health including bad breath. If you are prescribed antibiotics regularly, you may need to discuss these effects with your dentist. Some people may have staining on their teeth that can be attributed to a history of antibiotic use. In most cases this involved the use of Tetracycline antibiotics. Tetracycline staining can be difficult to remove however you can talk to your dentist about some o the available treatment options.

Women who suffer from osteoporosis or thinning of the bones are often prescribed a group of mediations called Bisphosphonates. While these medications are effective in slowing the bone thinning process, they can have serious implications for the jaw bone when teeth are extracted or when other invasive dental procedures are required. Patients taking bisphosphonates must discuss this with their dentist prior to having any dental treatment and in some cases referral to a specialist oral surgeon may be required.

Diet pills used to suppress appetite can also reduce saliva production and in turn put you at greater risk of tooth decay and gum disease. Good oral health care and more regular preventive care visits are very important if you are needing to take these types of medication.

Smoking

Smoking increases your risk of gum disease, decay and tooth loss. The nicotine, tar and other chemicals in cigarettes builds up on the teeth, tongue, cheeks and gums and research shows that smoking is the leading cause of mouth and throat cancer. Even with good dental hygiene, smokers are still at risk. Smoking also reduces the saliva production which causes a dry mouth. This in turn allows an overgrowth of bacteria, increasing dental decay and bad breath. Most smokers will also find their teeth have yellow staining. Chewing sugarless gum, regular preventive care visits, tooth whitening and neutral mouth rinses can all help with the effects of smoking, but the best way to avoid smoking related oral health problems is to stop smoking.

Women in sport

More women are playing sport and the incidence of sport related dental injuries is increasing. Mouth guards are an essential part of contact sports such as football and hockey, but it is the lower impact sports such as netball where many of the injuries are being seen. An accidental elbow to the face can cause damage to the teeth, lips, cheek and tongue. While you may still end up with bruising, a mouth guard can significantly reduce the damage to your teeth. A chipped, broken or knocked out tooth can be a painful experience that requires lengthy and costly treatment to correct.

There are a number of different mouth guards available from the “off the shelf boil” style through to one that is professionally fabricated and fitted. A mouth guard that is professionally fitted from your dentist involves taking impressions of your teeth and having the mouth guard made by a laboratory from a strong acrylic material. The better the fit and the stronger the material, the better protection the mouth guard will give you. The design of mouth guards can also be altered to increase your performance and this is becoming popular for elite and professional athletes. It involves using the mouth guard to change the position of your jaw and open the airway to improve oxygen intake. If you are interested in this technology, talk to your dentist or ask for a referral to a dentist who has a special interest in mouth guard sports performance.

TMJ disorder

Countless Australian's have TMJ disorder and it is more common in women than in men. TMJ disorder is the syndrome that results when the muscles in the jaw and the temporomandibular joint are out of alignment, causing problems when chewing. Put simply, the ligaments, muscles, bones and joints do not line up, causing pain and long term damage to the jaw joint and the teeth. Common symptoms of TMJ disorder include a clicking, popping or grating sound when opening or closing the mouth, headaches and/or dizziness, tenderness in the jaw muscles, earache, jaws that sometimes lock open when yawning or if mouth is held open, spasm or cramps in the jaw area or locking of the jaw.

TMJ can be caused by a number of things including injury or accidents, developmental (natural) defects, including the wearing-down of teeth or fillings causing a mal-alignment of the teeth, surgery, orthodontics and stress that causes clenching of the jaws and grinding of the teeth. Long term, TMJ disorder can cause permanent damage to the jaw joint requiring high risk surgery, permanent pain that is difficult to manage, damage and wear to the teeth, constant headaches, neck pain, dizziness and ringing in the ears, altered lifestyle choices because of pain and a locked jaw.

If the temporomandibular area has been damaged by arthritis or as a result of an accident, surgery may be needed to correct the damage and re-establish the proper occlusion. This surgery is high risk and generally has a low success rate. In most other cases, your dentist will recommend a therapy that may include an occlusal orthotic and specific exercises to keep the teeth from touching and to allow the joint to remain lined up, allowing the jaw's hinge area to relax. Such therapy increases your comfort by diminishing the TMJ pain. The long term treatment options will vary depending on the severity of the condition. They may range from continual orthotic usage to orthodontics, to full mouth rehabilitation using crown build ups.

It is important to be aware that TMJ disorder is not always curable. Certain treatments may minimize or reduce the symptoms, however in more advance cases, the damage is often irreversible. Early detection and treatment is the best 'cure'.

Diet and exercise

What you eat has a direct impact on your teeth and your risk of decay. A healthy balanced diet high in natural foods and low in processed sugary foods is ideal. Many natural foods such as fruit are high in sugar, however it is the sticky sweets such as lollies, chocolate that promote the growth of bacteria which then forms plaque. Tea and coffee with added sugar, soft drinks and sports drinks also contain high sugar levels. Water is the ideal drink to hydrate you and to rinse your mouth to remove sugar and bacteria after you have eaten. If you need sports drinks during exercise, it is important to rinse your mouth with water immediately following the sports drink.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia can impact significantly on your dental health. These conditions involve complex medical issues and need to be managed by a team of specialists. From a dental perspective, it is the increased acid levels associated with vomiting that erode the enamel on the teeth. Increased acid levels also occur in patients who suffer from reflux so your dentist may discuss the evidence of erosion with you. Regular brushing and mouth rinse usually isn't enough to neutralize the acid and it can actually cause increased damage to the softened tooth structure. There are a number of treatments including fluoride applications and Tooth Mousse which can be used at home to assist in protecting the tooth enamel. In more severe cases it may be necessary to place resin filling material on the teeth to replace the missing enamel. If you suffer from either an eating disorder or reflux, you need to talk to your GP.

Dental care for life

At Anzac Avenue Dental we are committed to providing you with dental care for life. Our dentists, oral therapists, hygienists and highly trained support team aim to address your immediate dental concerns as well as providing you with a plan for long term oral health care. We understand that a visit to the dentist isn't high on anybody's list of things to do, but we hope that with education, a highly skilled and caring team and a relaxed and comfortable environment, we can make your dental visits a routine part of your overall health care.