



Hormones and Periodontal Disease: It's a **Girl** Thing

It's been argued in popular culture that "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" when it comes to relationships. In his 1992 self-help book with that very title, Dr. John Gray theorized that the genders are as different as beings from another planet. He applied this theory to relationships with regard to communication styles and emotional needs, and speculated that those differences are the basis for most relationship problems. When it comes to oral health, another difference may be attributed along gender lines: Hormones may make women more susceptible to periodontal disease.

Women who are or have been pregnant may be aware of the oral health changes that take place when they are expecting. During pregnancy, the body's hormone levels rise considerably, and pregnant women can see an increased chance of developing gingivitis, a milder and reversible form of periodontal disease. (Left untreated, gingivitis may lead to a more serious, destructive form of periodontal disease called periodontitis.) Gingivitis, which is especially common during the second to eighth months of pregnancy, may cause red, puffy, or tender gums that bleed when brushed. This sensitivity is an exaggerated response to plaque and is caused by an increased level of progesterone in the body. More frequent dental cleanings during the second trimester or early third trimester can help expectant mothers avoid gingivitis.

However, hormonal changes can also affect the oral health of women at other stages of their lives. According to the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP), fluctuating hormone levels can affect gum tissues, increasing a woman's chances of developing gingivitis. This can start as early as the onset of puberty, when there is an increased level of the two female sex hormones, progesterone and estrogen. The hormones can increase blood circulation to the gums, which leads to gum sensitivity and inflammation due to irritants, such as food particles. When this happens, the gums may become swollen, turn red, and feel tender, says the AAP. The tendency for the gums to swell in response to irritants will lessen as puberty progresses.



Medical Center, some studies report that this is caused by desogestrel, a synthetic progesterone that is contained in some oral contraceptives. However, treating this type of periodontal disease is a delicate balance, according to the AAP, because antibiotics taken to treat periodontal disease may lessen the effect of oral contraceptives.

Midlife Oral Health Crisis

As women age, hormones continue to wreak havoc with oral health. Women who are menopausal or postmenopausal can also experience changes in their mouths, including discomfort, dry mouth, pain and burning sensation in the gums, and altered taste.

Hormonal changes can affect a woman's oral health at many life stages, including puberty, pregnancy, and menopause.

The hormonal changes that begin at the onset of puberty can continue to affect a woman's oral health in the time surrounding menstruation, according to the AAP. A few days before the onset of their period, some women may experience bleeding gums that are red and swollen and develop sores on the inside of the cheeks. This condition is called menstruation gingivitis, and the symptoms clear up once the period begins.

Women who take oral contraceptives are also at risk for developing oral health issues similar to those experienced during pregnancy, including red, swollen, and bleeding gums. According to the University of Maryland

Additionally, menopausal women may develop menopausal gingivostomatitis, a rare condition exemplified by gums that are dry or shiny, bleed easily, and range in color from abnormally pale to deep red. Estrogen supplements may help alleviate these symptoms.

While women may not be able to control how hormonal changes affect their bodies and oral health, they can help keep the impact to a minimum by maintaining good oral hygiene habits. This includes having regular (twice a year) dental cleanings and checkups, as well as brushing teeth at least twice a day and flossing properly daily. Women will also want to pay attention to their gums and contact their dentist if they notice persistent changes or symptoms (such as swollen, bleeding gums) that don't subside.

