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How hormones and habits affect your pearly whites.

By Katy Koontz

Hormones get the blame for moody blues and lots of other things. But would you believe they may actually contribute to dental dilemmas?

During menstruation, pregnancy, oral-contraceptive use and menopause, hormonal fluctuations may trigger dental and oral-health problems that require special care, says Barbara J. Steinberg, D.D.S., professor of medicine at the Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

So, the better you care for teeth and gums now, the fewer problems you'll have when hormones fluctuate significantly. Fortunately, most hormone-triggered maladies can be remedied before they play havoc with your smile. Here's a list of what can happen when—and what you can do.

Menstruation

Some women experience swollen, red and bleeding gums known as gingivi-

tis just before their periods begin; others may also develop cold sores. While both usually clear up when your period starts, untreated chronic gingivitis can lead to loose teeth that may even fall out, says Steinberg. If you're prone to gingivitis, floss at least once a day, brush twice a day or more and see your dentist regularly.

If You're On the Pill

Anyone who has ever taken oral contraceptives, which contain a number

of synthetic hormones, knows they can have their effects, too, including dry mouth (due to a reduced flow of saliva) and gingivitis, to name just a few.

But women who have healthy gums before taking the pill often have fewer dental problems after they start than women with poor pre-pill oral health, Steinberg says.

Another concern for women on the pill who also require dental surgery is the prescribing of antibiotics. Several commonly prescribed ones, including penicillin and tetracycline, may compromise the effectiveness of the pill. So, if you have to take antibiotics (for example, after having your wisdom teeth removed), use a second form of birth control for the remainder of your menstrual cycle.

Pregnancy

More dental and gum problems occur during pregnancy than in any other

feminine smiles

What's New at the Dentist?

Far less pain and trauma, for starters, including a few high-tech procedures that could even make going to the dentist a little fun.

■ Computerized fillings:

Dentistry enters the space age. With CAD/CAM (computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing) dentistry, an infrared camera photographs your tooth and a computer draws a reconstruction of how the filled tooth would appear. In an interactive unit, the computer then constructs the filling based on the CAD-CAM design. Office time is reduced from several dental visits over a few weeks' time to one appointment lasting an hour or less.

■ Painless (honest!) "drilling":

It's called the kinetic cavity preparation system and it doesn't hurt a bit, according to Ronald E. Goldstein, D.D.S., a practicing dentist in Atlanta.

Instead of a drill, the dentist uses a high-speed stream of tiny metal particles (alpha alumina) that acts like a miniature sandblaster to smooth away slightly decayed areas before they become cavities. There are no tears—and no anesthesia, either.

stage of a woman's life, again probably because of hormonal changes, says Steinberg. Gingivitis is common during the first trimester, with mild to severe symptoms according to the condition of your teeth and gums before pregnancy. Rigorous dental hygiene and additional professional cleanings—as often as once a month for serious conditions—are vital.

Some pregnant women also develop reddened, fingerlike protrusions of inflamed gum tissue between teeth called pregnancy tumors, which are not cancerous and usually disappear after the baby is born. If they don't, and your dentist recommends surgery to remove them, you should wait until after pregnancy to avoid the X-rays that are usually necessary. Most experts advise against *all* X-rays during pregnancy (even routine dental ones), although some say they may be safe in emergencies if the dentist takes stringent precautions, including draping a lead shield across your torso.

Most dentists also advise that you avoid nitrous oxide (laughing gas)

during pregnancy, especially during the first trimester when the baby's organs are forming, because it may increase the chance of spontaneous abortion and fetal anomalies. Some dentists believe that nitrous oxide is safe in the second and third trimesters; others disagree. Consult your dentist, if possible, *before* you conceive to clear up problems that may require X-rays and/or surgery. Because some research shows that laughing gas may cause infertility, it may be best to avoid it if you're trying to get pregnant.

The Big Change

Hormonal imbalances during menopause can also cause a dry mouth, changes in your taste buds and a burning sensation in the mouth and tongue.

Treatments may include salivary substitutes, a nonmedicinal oral lubricant in the form of drops or sprays. Estrogen replacement therapy may also help alleviate such conditions.

Since many oral-health problems, including dry mouth, have medical

overtones, your dentist may refer you to a physician for evaluation before treating the condition.

Eating Away at Your Teeth

Although it's not a normal phenomenon in women's lives, we include bulimia because it is a disease among some women and it can take a serious toll on teeth.

Gastric acids brought into the mouth by repeated vomiting can seriously wear away tooth enamel. Steinberg suggests not to brush your teeth after vomiting because this actually brushes acid into the enamel. Instead, wash your mouth out with water and a fluoride rinse. If tooth enamel becomes severely worn, daily fluoride therapy and extensive capping may be required.

Of course, this is the least of the health problems caused by bulimia. If you suffer from it, you should seek help from professionals who specialize in eating disorders.

Katy Koontz is a free-lance writer based in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Brave New Dental Products

Fighting plaque and gum disease has never been easier thanks to the latest high-tech gadgets. Here are our experts' picks:

- **The thin blue line:** Dentists recommend you get a new toothbrush every three months after bristles bend and fray, but who can remember? The Braun Oral-B Indicator toothbrush from Braun AG has blue outer bristles that fade after three to four months, signaling your toothbrush is over the hill.

- **Buzz off!** with OralGiene, a unique mechanical toothbrush that can clean six surfaces of your teeth at the same time, including under the gum line. It's manufactured by OralGiene USA Inc.

- **Electronic floss:** The Gingibrush, a gum-therapy system from U.S. DenTek Corp., is a battery-operated, cone-shaped brush that gets in between your teeth like floss, stimulates gums and cuts down on gum disease. (But you still need to brush with a regular brush.)

- **Fingers numb from flossing?** Here comes DentalLoop to the rescue, an easy-to-use loop of dental floss from Marion Donovan



Associates that you simply lace between your fingers instead of tightly wrapping around. One side of the loop is regular, unwaxed dental floss; the flip side is blue and fluffy for use by those with sensitive gums.

- **Brushing on the run?** It's easy with the Braun Oral-B Plaque Remover from Braun AG. The cup-shaped brush head has rounded bristles that remove plaque from hard-to-reach areas and clean along the gumline. Oral-B Plaque Remover is available in two at-home models as well as a portable travel model.

- **At-home bleaching:** For a blinding smile without endless office visits, ask your dentist about special at-home bleaching kits, suggests George Murrell, D.D.S., of Manhattan Beach, California. The dentist makes a mold of your teeth, which you take home, fill with bleaching solution and wear for a few hours from one to seven days, depending on desired whiteness. While you will have to return to the dentist for a quick checkup to monitor progress, the kits are far more effective—and safer—than over-the-counter bleaching products.

