



# Brush Up on Oral Health

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## Promoting Oral Health Services for Pregnant People

Pregnancy is an exciting time in a person's life. It is safe and important to get oral health care during pregnancy. For example, pregnant people can have their teeth cleaned, have X-rays taken, and receive treatment. Preventing oral disease can help keep a person healthy during pregnancy.

This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet talks about oral health concerns during pregnancy and offers tips for Head Start staff to help pregnant people keep their mouths healthy.



## Oral Health Concerns During and After Pregnancy

Many pregnant people develop pregnancy gingivitis (gum disease). Signs of gingivitis include red, swollen gums that bleed when brushing or flossing. During pregnancy, hormones change making gums more sensitive to the bacteria that cause gum disease. If pregnancy gingivitis is not treated, the infection can cause a person to lose teeth and can impact their overall health.

After the baby is born, a mother with untreated tooth decay has more bacteria that cause tooth decay than a mother who has a healthy mouth. This bacteria can be passed from the mother to their baby through saliva sharing activities, such as when the mother tests the temperature of a bottle with their mouth and then gives the bottle to their baby, places the baby's pacifier or bottle nipple in their mouth to clean it, or shares a fork or spoon with the baby. Babies who get the bacteria early in their life are much more likely to develop tooth decay in their primary (baby) teeth and permanent teeth than babies who get the bacteria later.

## Tips for Head Start Staff to Help Pregnant People Keep a Healthy Mouth

1. **Brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.** Remind pregnant people that brushing with a soft bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste in the morning and before bed removes bacteria that cause oral disease.

2. **Floss once a day.** Help pregnant people understand that flossing once a day removes bacteria from the sides of teeth where a toothbrush cannot reach. This is especially important for keeping gums healthy. Invite a dental hygienist or dentist to the program to show pregnant people the best method for flossing and give feedback to improve their flossing technique.



3. **Consume healthy foods and beverages.**

Consuming healthy foods and beverages, especially those low in sugar, helps keep pregnant people healthy. Teach pregnant people how to read nutrition labels to identify foods and beverages high in sugar. Remind them to drink fluoridated water throughout the day.

4. **Receive oral health care.** Help pregnant people find a dentist if they don't have one. Ask for a referral to a dentist from the person's physician, the local or [state health department](#), the local or state dental association, social service professionals, or the state [dental hygienist liaison](#). [Healthy Habits for Happy Smiles: Getting Oral Health Care While You Are Pregnant](#) [PDF, 863KB] also offers strategies for getting oral health care during pregnancy.

5. **Tackle morning sickness.** Many people feel sick or vomit during pregnancy, especially during the first three months. Many times, having small snacks throughout the day helps. However, this can increase a pregnant person's risk of developing tooth decay. Encourage pregnant people to choose healthy foods low in sugar or to brush more than twice a day. Urge those who vomit often to rinse with a teaspoon of baking soda mixed in a cup of warm water to stop stomach acids from attacking their teeth.

6. **Role-play a dental visit.** Role-playing can help relieve fears that pregnant people may have about dental visits. Prepare a script with the person where they tell the dental team that they are pregnant and when the baby is due. Work with the person to develop questions that cover any concerns or questions they have about getting care while pregnant. Invite a dentist or dental hygienist to participate in the role-playing activity.

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