Dental Care for a Healthy Baby

By Darcy Clinton
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The test just came back positive, but you're already being bombarded with advice and pregnancy stories from friends, family and people you've just met. Some stories are helpful, while others are simply frightening.

"The first time I was pregnant, complete strangers were stopping me on the street to tell me about their experiences," said Khristen Vanderwey, 33, of Lake Worth. "I probably heard every old wives' tale or horror story you could think of."

Vanderwey said, by her fourth pregnancy, she stopped listening. But some of those old wives' tales -- like losing a tooth for every baby delivered -- are actually based on fact.

So while you're adding things to your growing to-do list, include a dental check-up right at the top. Dental health is important in every stage of your life, and pregnancy is no exception. Your teeth and gum tissue undergo changes when you're pregnant, and proper dental care helps ensure both you and your baby stay healthy.

How Does Pregnancy Affect Your Teeth and Gums?
Bacteria in plaque, a sticky, colorless film constantly forming on your teeth, cause gum tissue to become inflamed. Hormonal changes during pregnancy mean a small amount of plaque can easily turn into gingivitis during pregnancy, said Dr. Alan Slootsky, a Pompano Beach-based restorative implant dentist. "Pregnancy gingivitis symptoms include swollen, bleeding or tender gums and pain," he said. According to statistics reported by the American Academy of Periodontology, about 50 percent of women experience pregnancy gingivitis.

What is Periodontitis?
Periodontitis is a bacterial infection of the gum tissue that surrounds and supports your teeth. "Gingivitis is reversible but when left untreated can develop into periodontitis, a severe and irreversible infection, which can lead to both bone and tooth loss," Slootsky said. "Several studies have shown that by keeping up with dental hygiene and taking care of their dental health before and during pregnancy, women are less likely to deliver pre-term or low-birthweight babies."

What is the link between periodontal disease and pre-term delivery?
"Studies have shown a relationship between periodontal disease and pre-term, low-birth-weight babies," said Dr. Gene Sherman a former practicing dentist and senior vice president of Baton Rouge, La.-based AlwaysCare Benefits. "Women who have periodontal disease may be seven times more likely to deliver a baby that is born too early or too small." Prostaglandin, a labor-inducing chemical, is found in oral bacteria. Women with severe periodontal disease exhibit high levels of prostaglandin, which may be the link between early, low-birth weight deliveries and periodontal

disease.

Can your baby inherit dental disease?
According to a study reported by the Academy of General Dentistry, children born to mothers with untreated tooth decay had four times the risk of decay compared with children of other mothers.

The March of Dimes lists premature births as the No. 1 obstetric problem in the United States. Premature babies who survive may struggle with a multitude of serious health problems.

For optimum health, dentists recommend pregnant women see their dentist or hygienist at least twice during their pregnancy for a cleaning. And before trying to conceive, make a visit to get x-rays and a thorough cleaning.

Where to find affordable dental care

1. If you have access to employer sponsored plans, ask your employer to include a dental plan.
2. **Some companies, including AlwaysCare Benefits www.alwayscarebenefits.com, 888-729-5433, offer individual dental policies to South Florida residents.**
3. Broward Dental Research Clinic, Davie, 954-201-6779
4. Caridad Health and Dental Clinic, Boynton Beach, 561-737-6336
5. Mission Medical Center, Delray Beach, 561-637-2758