



Small Bites



DO continue to see your dentist on a regular basis.



DO learn how to manage your stress levels.



DO be extra aware of oral health changes during pregnancy.



DO make healthy dietary choices like dairy, vegetables, fruits and proteins.



DON'T engage in behaviors such as smoking or excessively drinking alcohol.

At 24, Lisa is enjoying one of the best times of her life. She's experiencing independence like she's never had before – and with independence comes responsibility, including the responsibility to take care of her oral health.

Remember the Basics

Up until now, Lisa's parents have instilled good oral health habits, like brushing twice a day and flossing once daily. Now that she's on her own, it's important to maintain those habits. Many people neglect regular dental visits during this phase of life. In fact, a third of American adults don't visit the dentist yearly. **Continuing with regular dental appointments** is essential to good oral health, but may also save Lisa money. Seeing her dentist helps ensure that problems will be addressed before they become more serious – and more expensive.

Don't Stress Out

Though her 20s have been a blast so far, work and studying means Lisa is experiencing true stress for the first time. As a result, she has come down with TMJ (temporomandibular joint) syndrome, a condition characterized by pain in the jaw and sometimes accompanied by nighttime tooth grinding. Her dentist suggested wearing a night guard (occlusal guard) to ward against sleep-grinding. Lisa's doctor says she can **keep stress levels down with healthy eating, deep breathing and plenty of sleep and exercise**. Stress induces the hormone cortisol, which harms teeth and gums – and can contribute to gum disease. High stress levels can also lead to canker sores, burning mouth syndrome and cold sores.

Can the Soda, Avoid Junk Food

At Lisa's age, healthy eating can fall by the wayside. Eating out and swigging soda (even diet soda) will take a toll on her teeth over time. Luckily, she can take a few easy steps to temper the bad habits.

- Limiting soft drinks in favor of water or milk is an easy way to keep harmful acids from causing enamel loss.
- **Drinking more fluoridated water** will help Lisa stay hydrated and protect against tooth decay.
- Keeping starchy and sugary snacks to a minimum is another huge favor Lisa can do for her teeth. Eating fruits, cheeses, nuts and veggies instead will also help her keep cavities at bay.

Avoid Unhealthy Habits

Like many people in their 20s, Lisa enjoys the occasional cocktail with friends. While moderate alcohol consumption can have minor health benefits, **excessive drinking can adversely affect oral health and overall health**. In the short term, drinking too much alcohol can result in dry mouth and bad breath. A lifetime of this behavior has been linked to a significantly greater risk for oral cancer.

As for smoking, Lisa has tried it but has wisely decided that it's not for her. Smoking can lead to an increased risk of oral cancer and gum disease, not to mention yellow teeth.

On average, men who smoke lose 13.2 years from their lives and women who smoke lose 14.5 years. Smoking has been identified as one of the most significant causes of periodontal disease in the U.S.

Expect Oral Health Changes When You're Expecting

When Lisa is ready to start a family, calling her obstetrician should be at the top of her to-do list. After that, if she hasn't already been keeping up with regular dental appointments, she should call her dentist for a checkup and cleaning. It's safest to take care of dental problems during the second trimester. If a dental emergency should need attention in the third trimester, Lisa will need to consult her obstetrician before getting work done.

"Pregnancy gingivitis" can affect women between the second and eighth month of pregnancy. **Increased hormones – specifically, estrogen and progesterone – affect how gum tissue reacts to plaque**. To make sure build-up doesn't occur, pregnant women should brush twice a day and floss at least daily, paying special attention to the gum line.

"Pregnancy tumors," red growths of gum tissue found between the teeth, may also make an unwelcome appearance during pregnancy. They're completely benign, however, and are usually left to subside on their own.

By getting cleanings during her pregnancy, Lisa will be benefiting more than just her own health. Studies have shown that a pregnant woman's oral health is linked to her baby's overall health.

Oral health may not feel like a priority during this phase of life, but it should be. By maintaining basic habits, eating healthy and keeping regular dentist appointments, Lisa's oral health will be in great shape for the future.