



WORKING TOWARDS EXCELLENCE

Mouthcare for people living with dementia.

A guide for carers

Why is oral care important?

Oral care is essential for everyone to maintain clean and healthy teeth and mouths.

However people with dementia are at a greater risk of poor oral health.

Some of the symptoms of dementia impact adversely on mouths. The loss of cognitive skills and memory can bring about complete dependence on carers to keep the mouth clean and healthy and can make wearing dentures very difficult or impossible.

It's a fact that people living with dementia have a higher risk of tooth decay but it can be very difficult for them to accept mouthcare and dental treatment.

Oral problems can bring about adverse changes in personality if a person is unable to express pain or discomfort.

If swallowing problems develop bacteria may be inhaled into the lungs (aspiration). Aspiration of the harmful bacteria that develops in unclean mouths can lead to life threatening respiratory difficulties and chest infections known as aspiration pneumonia.

For these reasons we need to do all we can to keep mouths clean and healthy.

How often should oral care be performed?

Oral care should be performed at least twice a day. Morning and last thing at night are the usual times but they may not be the best time for the person.

Who should perform oral care?

Someone in the early stages of dementia should carry out their own mouth care for as long as possible. They may need to be reminded to do it, or they may need to be supervised. The carer can give them the brush and toothpaste and show them what to do. Give short, simple instructions.

Using a 'watch me' technique and /or hand on hand can be helpful. There are toothbrushes with large handles and angled heads to make them easier to use. Alternatively you may need special handgrips and other adaptations which can be fitted to manual toothbrush to make them easier to hold. Electric toothbrushes with oscillating heads are very effective at providing a large amount of cleaning action with very little movement needed from the user, although you do need to position the brush correctly and if the person isn't used to a power brush it probably won't be accepted.

There are brushes which brush all surfaces of the teeth at the same time, Superbrushes. These can make brushing easier, especially if a carer is brushing.

As dementia progresses, the person may lose the ability to clean their teeth effectively. They may stop understanding that their teeth need to be kept clean, or lose interest in doing so. The carers need to take over this task using a small headed dry brush and a pea size amount of fluoride toothpaste. If a low foaming toothpaste is preferred, look for one without Sodium Laurel Sulphate such as Pronamel and most of the sensodyne range.

Caring for you, locally

How to perform oral care for those who need help?

- The person should always be seated. Stand behind them because it helps to support their head and means your hands are in the most appropriate position to brush their teeth. If they will allow, gently retract the lips and cheeks so you can see where the brush is going.
- Place the head of the toothbrush against the teeth brushing all surfaces of the teeth including the gums and necks of the teeth.
- Don't rinse the mouth after brushing as it is important to leave the fluoride on the teeth to help strengthen the enamel and help fight decay for longer.
- Use a small torch so that you can check the mouth and make sure it's clean.

And when there is no cooperation?

When this happens we should still keep trying because the consequences of poor oral health can have such an adverse effect on wellbeing and quality of life. There may be someone that the person responds better to, or try a different time in the day. Sometimes it can take two people, one to brush and the other to distract. Brushing doesn't have to be done in the bathroom. As long as dignity is maintained it may be easier to brush in another area where the person feels more comfortable. Because people with dementia often have more tooth decay and are less able to accept treatment it's very important to get fluoride around the teeth twice a day. In times when no tooth brushing can be done put a small pea size piece of toothpaste on the lower lip. This will be licked off and taken into the mouth providing some protection. **Sugary foods and drinks between meals will greatly increase the risk of decay and should be avoided.** This can be difficult for someone who eats little and often. Seek advice from the dental services as extra fluoride may be needed.

Caring for dentures.

Oral care is equally important for people with no natural teeth to keep the mouth clean, healthy. Dentures should be removed at night to allow the gums to rest. They should be cleaned twice a day, morning and night, and rinsed after eating to remove any debris. When removed, all surfaces of the dentures should be brushed with a toothbrush or denture brush to remove any plaque and debris. Dentures can be brushed with warm soapy water, a denture cleanser will help to remove stubborn stains. Ensure you clean dentures over a sink filled with water in case you accidentally drop them.

When not in the mouth they should be left to soak in cold water to prevent them warping and cracking.

If you have concerns and need further advice?

There are several behavioural changes that may indicate that someone with dementia is experiencing dental problems. These may include:

- Refusal to eat, (particularly hard or cold foods)
- Frequent pulling at the face or mouth
- Leaving previously worn dentures out of the mouth
- Increased restlessness, moaning or shouting
- Disturbed sleep
- Refusal to take part in daily activities
- Aggressive behaviour.

If you notice any problems please contact the person's usual dentist.

If the person does not have a dentist and has extra needs they may be eligible for care with

Locala Dental Care. For more information visit www.locala.org.uk

Or contact NHS England 03003 112 233 or visit NHS choices at www.nhs.uk