

CAREGIVER NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2020

ORAL HEALTH TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS of Persons Diagnosed with Alzheimer's and Other Dementias

With all of the other concerns and responsibilities involved in taking care of a person with Alzheimer's Disease and other Dementias [AD/D], dental care can be easily overlooked. As dementia progresses, the individual with dementia may forget how to brush his or her teeth or forget why it is important. As a caregiver, you may have to assist or take a more hands-on approach. Proper oral care is necessary to prevent eating difficulties, digestive problems and serious infections that can affect quality of life. Loose painful teeth or ill-fitting dentures may result in a reduced desire or ability to eat resulting in poor nutrition. For individuals with diabetes, treating gum disease may help lower the person's blood sugar level.

Daily Oral Care

In the early stages of dementia, dental care focuses on prevention. Getting check-ups and cleaning and flossing teeth regularly can prevent the need for extensive procedures later on, when the person with dementia may be less able to tolerate them.

Tips for Daily oral Care

- **Use a “watch me” technique.** Hold a toothbrush and show the person how to brush his or her teeth or put your hand over the person's hand, gently guiding the brush.
- **Keep the teeth and mouth clean.** Very gently brush the person's teeth, gums, tongue and roof of the mouth at least twice a day, with the last brushing after the evening meal and after any nighttime liquid medication. Allow plenty of time and find a comfortable position if you must do the brushing yourself. Gently place the toothbrush in the person's mouth at a 45 degree angle so you massage gum tissue as you clean the teeth. Be aware that electric devices may enhance confusion.
- **If the person seems agitated or uncooperative,** postpone brushing until later in the day. You may need to try different types of toothbrushes (soft bristled with longer handle or angled brushes may be easier).

**“Whether you have teeth or not, smile!
Because our world always needs a smile!”**

— Mehmet Murat ildan



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- **If the person wears dentures**, rinse them with plain water after meals and brush them daily to remove food particles. Each night, remove them and soak in a cleanser or mouthwash. Then, use a soft toothbrush or moistened gauze pad to clean the gums, tongue and other soft mouth tissues.
- **Floss regularly.** Most dentists recommend flossing daily. If using floss is distressing to the person with dementia, try using a “proxabrush” or water flossing machine such as a Waterpik to clean between teeth instead. This is much easier than trying to use string floss. Remember to proceed slowly and calmly and let your loved one know what you are going to do next. Be mindful of the water temperature and pressure setting.
- **Be aware of potential mouth pain.** Investigate any signs of mouth discomfort during mealtime. Refusing to eat or strained facial expressions while eating may indicate mouth pain or dentures that do not fit properly.
- **Fluoride toothpaste** – Fluoride toothpaste should be used to brush natural teeth whenever possible, once or twice a day if possible. After brushing with toothpaste, do not rinse with a lot of water and try to leave some toothpaste behind around the teeth to prolong exposure to fluoride.

Individuals with AD/D are susceptible to dental problems for a number of reasons, including:

- **Reduced saliva** – certain medications may reduce the production of saliva by the salivary glands. Saliva is essential to maintain a healthy mouth and to prevent the onset of dental decay and other oral lesions. Individuals with dementia may also have a reduced flow of saliva, even when not taking medications.
- **Medications** – taking long term, sugar based medications can lead to tooth decay, dry mouth and difficulties with dentures.
- **Increased sugar intake**

To reduce the impact of the above issues, consider the following:

- Encourage the individual with dementia to drink plenty of water or spray some water into the individual's mouth with a spray bottle.
- After eating food with a higher than normal sugar content, have the individual drink water to rinse out his/her mouth. This will help flush out residual food particles and bacteria, thus preventing the build-up of tartar and plaque.
- Try to end meals with fruits or vegetables. Acid in fruit will break down the sugar and starch in the mouth and the crunchiness of raw vegetables will help remove plaque from the teeth.
- Find the right dentist – contact your local dental society to find the names of professionals who have experience working with people with dementia or elderly patients.
- Coordinate care – provide the dentist with a list of all health care providers caring for the person with dementia, as well as a list of all medications. Certain medications can contribute to dry mouth and other oral health issues.
- As dementia progresses, individuals may become increasingly agitated and noncompliant during cleanings. This is understandable, as dentist appointments can be uncomfortable. Try to attend scheduled dental exams for as long as your loved one is able. However, understand that difficult dementia behaviors and diminishing capacity to understand what is going on may eventually make regular cleanings too traumatic. At that point, assisting your loved one with flossing, brushing and rinsing as often as they will allow is the best way to maintain their oral health.

Information taken from Aging Care: <https://www.agingcare.com/articles/oral-health-tips-for-dementia-caregivers-203144.htm>; Alzheimer's Association: <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/dental-care>; Dementia Australia: <https://www.dementia.org.au/support-and-services/families-and-friends/personal-care/dental-care>