

Mouth care and oral health for a person with dementia



Maintaining good oral health is essential for the overall wellbeing of people living with dementia. A regular daily mouth care routine can help prevent problems like cavities and infections and avoid pain when eating, drinking and communicating.

People with dementia are prone to tooth decay and gum disease, and they may find it difficult to carry out their daily mouth care routine. For example, they may:

- forget to clean their teeth or dentures
- forget or not understand why oral care is important
- have difficulty remembering the processes involved in mouth care
- have problems with mobility that make it difficult to clean their teeth
- find visits to the dentist distressing
- be unable to communicate that they have toothache or other mouth pain, leading to problems going untreated
- have sensory issues that make oral care unpleasant
- develop an increasingly

sweet tooth, making cavities more likely

Many people with dementia will require some support to keep up with their oral hygiene routine, keep their teeth and gums clean and identify any problems early.

Watch the person for signs of discomfort when brushing their teeth or at other times. They may hold their face; grimace; struggle with ill-fitting dentures; have loose teeth; experience frequent bleeding; or be sensitive to hot or cold food and drink. If you notice any of these signs, consult a dentist as soon as possible.

Sugar and oral health

Some people with dementia – particularly frontotemporal dementia, which is most common in people aged 40 to 60 – develop an increasingly sweet tooth. Eating sugary foods too frequently can cause tooth decay, so try to avoid giving the person with dementia too many foods with a high sugar content, especially between meals. Instead, you could try:

- vegetables
- fresh fruit



- bread with low sugar or sugar-free spreads such as reduced sugar jam, low fat cream cheese or sliced banana
- savoury crackers and cheese
- pitta bread with hummous or guacamole
- rice cakes or oatcakes
- plain yoghurt
- sugar-free jelly
- no added sugar breakfast cereals

To reduce the amount of sugar the person eats, you could avoid buying sugary foods like biscuits, cake, ice cream, sweets and chocolate or keep these out of sight and offer small portions (eg one biscuit) rather than bringing out the whole packet.

Many drinks are high in sugar, including fruit juice, squash and fizzy drinks so try to encourage the person with dementia to drink water as their main drink. You could also:

- encourage the person to drink milk instead of squash or fizzy drinks, or switch to diet or zero-calorie versions
- limit fruit juice to no more than 150ml a day – even fresh juice is high in sugar
- choose a no added sugar squash rather than a full sugar variety – but bear in mind that low sugar drinks can still be acidic and damage teeth
- try diluting no added sugar squash with sparkling water if the person likes fizzy drinks
- gradually reduce the amount of sugar the person has in their tea or coffee, if they take it, by adding slightly less each day

Caring for teeth and gums

Make sure that the person living with dementia continues to follow a mouth care routine twice a day and help them if they are unable or

reluctant to do it themselves. You may want to make brushing your teeth an activity you do together so that you can prompt, observe, and help them if needed. If there are young children living at home, they could clean their teeth together.

If the person tends to forget to brush their teeth, you could set daily reminders on their phone or a smart speaker.

It is a good idea to break the process down into small steps to make it more manageable: for example, you could encourage the person to pick up their toothbrush, apply toothpaste, run water onto the toothbrush, and so on.

If you need to brush the person's teeth for them, you could try:

- getting them to sit on a straight-backed chair – you can stand behind them and cradle their head against your body
- supporting their jaw to keep their teeth together to help clean the front of the teeth
- encouraging the person to open wide to help you clean the inside and chewing surfaces of the teeth

- using a toothbrush with a small head and medium bristles; a child's toothbrush may be easier to use
- using a pea-sized amount of toothpaste containing no less than 1450ppm fluoride (look on the tube or box to find out the fluoride content)
- using gentle, circular movements, paying extra attention to the area where the tooth meets the gum
- encouraging the person to spit out the toothpaste rather than rinse. The fluoride in the toothpaste will continue to protect their teeth for some time after brushing
- replacing the toothbrush when it begins to show wear, or every three months

When you are helping the person with dementia to brush their teeth, you may find that their gums bleed. This means that they have some plaque in their mouth, which is irritating their gums. Continue to brush their teeth as usual, but if the bleeding does not stop after two weeks, make an appointment with their dentist.

Dentures

If the person with dementia has dentures, it is essential that they are kept clean and are replaced if they become loose or damaged. If someone has recently received new dentures, they may need support in forming new cleaning habits.

You might like to try the following:

- Encourage the person with dementia to clean their dentures twice daily or do it for them if they are unable to
- Clean dentures over a bowl or sink of water so that they will not break if they are dropped
- Ensure the person takes their dentures out overnight
- Use a special denture brush and denture paste or non-perfumed liquid soap and water to remove all food and plaque deposits. Do not rely on overnight tablet cleaners in water as these are less effective
- Prompt the person to clean their remaining teeth or gums twice a day
- Use a gentle, soft-bristled toothbrush if they have no natural teeth



- Speak to a dentist about having a spare set of dentures made and/or having the person's name printed on the dentures
- Make sure you tell any new care staff that the person has dentures and ask where they can store them safely

Encouraging oral care if someone is reluctant

Sometimes, a person with dementia may be reluctant to clean their teeth or have them cleaned by someone else. These tips may help:

- Get everything ready before you start
- Show the person the toothbrush and toothpaste and explain what you are going to do

- The person may find it easier and more comfortable to clean their teeth with an electric toothbrush or a toothbrush with an adapted handle that is easier to hold
- Give short, clear instructions
- Try brushing your own teeth or miming doing it – the person may copy you
- If necessary, gently place your hand over the person's hand and guide the toothbrush to their mouth. Let them continue if they are able to, or help them move the toothbrush around their mouth
- Try using distraction, eg music, talking or giving the person a familiar object to hold whilst you brush their teeth
- Be willing to slow down or try a different time of day when the person may be more relaxed
- Break down the task if needed. Consider cleaning the mouth in small sections and repeat through the day

Seeing a specialist dental service

In some cases, it can be difficult for a dentist to examine and treat a person with dementia – for example if they become very distressed. If their dentist can no longer meet their needs, they may refer the person to an NHS community dental service or a local specialist dental service for people with additional needs.

A person with dementia might be referred for specialist dental care if they have difficulty communicating that they are in pain, or if they cannot consent to their treatment. They might require extra assistance or guidance with oral hygiene.

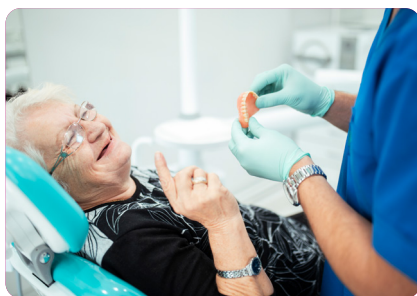
The service will have specialist dental equipment and staff who are trained in supporting people with dementia. In some cases, home visits may be possible to reduce the distress of visiting an unfamiliar environment.

For information about community dental services in your area, please contact the person's dentist.

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about mouth care or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-an-appointment



Dementia UK resources

Eating and drinking with dementia

dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking

Getting the best out of GP and other health appointments

dementiauk.org/health-appointments

Pain and dementia

dementiauk.org/pain

Personal hygiene

dementiauk.org/dementia-and-personal-hygiene

Other resources

Find an NHS dentist

nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist

NHS: dental treatment for people with special needs

nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/dental-treatment-for-people-with-special-needs

NHS: how to keep your teeth clean

nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-teeth-and-gums/how-to-keep-your-teeth-clean

NHS: who is entitled to free dental care in England?

nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/who-is-entitled-to-free-nhs-dental-treatment-in-england

Oral Health Foundation

dentalhealth.org

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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Thank you.



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