

ORAL HEALTH & AGING



YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!



BRUSHING & FLOSSING

INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS

ORAL HEALTH AND OLDER ADULTS

If you regularly help someone with oral health care, this fact sheet is for you. It offers practical suggestions about how to provide guidance or direct care, as well as tips that may make the job easier. Oral health is important for people of all ages. A healthy mouth helps people enjoy their food, chew better, eat well, and avoid pain and tooth loss. With good oral hygiene and regular visits to the dentist, older adults can maintain their oral health into their later years.

BRUSHING

If the person you care for can brush but needs some help or guidance:

- **Encourage self-care.** If the person you care for has a mild cognitive impairment, he or she might need reminders. For example, leave the toothbrush and toothpaste on the sink. Or, apply toothpaste and hand them the toothbrush, or model the behavior by brushing your teeth at the same time.
- **Encourage thorough brushing.** Most people are in a hurry when brushing their teeth. But thorough brushing and flossing are essential for removing dental plaque, a sticky film of bacteria. Plaque buildup can cause tooth decay, gum disease, and bad breath.

Make sure the person you care for:

- uses a toothbrush that fits easily around the back teeth; a smaller toothbrush is better than a larger toothbrush
- uses a small amount of toothpaste with fluoride
- brushes gently back and forth in short strokes
- brushes the front, back, and chewing surface of each tooth
- brushes the tongue

TIP:

Teeth that need more focused brushing include the lower front teeth, upper back teeth, and crooked teeth. Crowded teeth and teeth holding partials need extra attention.

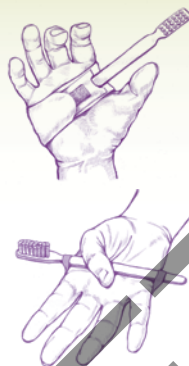


- **Adapt the toothbrush or try different types of toothbrushes.** Make the toothbrush easier to use or try a power or multiple-sided toothbrush.

MAKE THE TOOTHBRUSH EASIER TO HOLD.

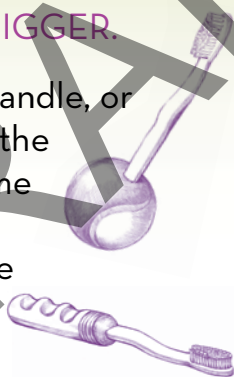
The same kind of strap used to hold food utensils is helpful for some people.

Others attach the brush to the hand with a wide elastic or rubber band. Make sure the band isn't too tight.



MAKE THE TOOTHBRUSH HANDLE BIGGER.

You can buy a toothbrush with a large handle, or you can slide a bicycle grip or ball onto the handle. Foam tubing, available from home health care catalogs, is also helpful. At least once a week, remove and clean the grip as well as the brush handle, and then allow them to dry thoroughly.



TRY OTHER TOOTHBRUSH OPTIONS.

A power toothbrush may make brushing easier. Take the time to help the person you care for get used to one. A multiple-sided toothbrush has two or three rows of bristles that angle inward, so it can clean many surfaces of the tooth at the same time.

- **Guide the toothbrush.** Help brush by placing your hand very gently over the person's hand and guiding the toothbrush.

DENTURES

- Dentures should be removed at night and brushed before putting them into a denture cup of water (ask the dentist if denture cleaning tablets should be used). Dentures need to be rinsed and brushed again before placing them in the mouth. They should be kept in water at all times when not in the mouth. Be sure to change the water in the cup daily.

TIP:

As people age, gum tissue may recede leaving larger gaps between teeth. Tiny brushes called interdental brushes can be used to clean between teeth.



If the person you care for is unable to brush, you need to brush his or her teeth.

GETTING STARTED

- Choose a location such as a kitchen or dining room that allows plenty of space to work. Make sure you have good lighting. Place your tools (toothbrush, toothpaste, dental mirror, towel, bowl, and glass of water) within reach.
- Make sure the person you care for is seated in a chair. Choose a position that is comfortable for both of you, and one that lets you see all the surfaces of the teeth. This may mean sitting to the front or side, or standing behind that person. A good technique is to brush from behind, cradling the head in the crook of your arm. This may be easier on you and more comfortable for the person receiving care.
- Ease the person you care for into the situation through conversation, and be patient as he or she gets used to you providing care.
- Use the “tell-show-do” approach. Tell what will happen, show it, and then do the oral care as you’ve explained.
- Have a dental care routine. Use the same technique at the same time and place every day.
- Be creative. If behavior problems arise, use favorite objects or music for comfort.
- Seek the advice of a dental professional for additional suggestions.

TIP:

Get a new toothbrush with soft bristles every 3 months or when the bristles are worn. Toothbrushes should also be replaced after a contagious illness.

BRUSHING THE TEETH

- Wash your hands and wear disposable gloves.
- Gently remove dentures or partials.
- Check between the teeth and cheeks where bits of food may gather.
- Be sure to use a regular or power toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use a small amount of toothpaste with fluoride. Toothpaste can bother people who have swallowing problems. In this case, brush with water instead.
- Place the toothbrush at the gum line. Gently brush back and forth in short strokes. Brush the front and back of all teeth. Then brush the chewing surfaces of the teeth, and the tongue.
- Help the person rinse with water. If he or she cannot rinse, give a drink of water or sweep the mouth with a finger wrapped in damp gauze.



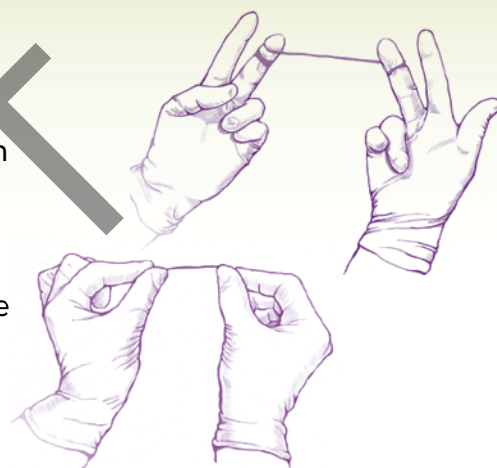
FLOSSING

Flossing removes dental plaque between teeth, but people with physical limitations may need help.

If the person you care for can floss, here are the steps he or she should follow:

Use a string of floss about two feet long. Wrap that piece around the middle finger of each hand. (Waxed, unwaxed, flavored, or plain floss all do the same thing. The person you care for might like one more than another, or a certain type might be easier to use.)

Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand. Start with the bottom teeth and work from one side to the other, then repeat on the upper teeth. Ease the floss gently between the teeth until it reaches the gumline. (Don't 'snap' or force the floss into place – this could harm the gums.)



Curve the floss like the letter “C” around each tooth, keeping in contact with the side of the tooth. Slide the floss up and down under the gum. Do this for both sides of every tooth, one side at a time. Adjust the floss a little as you move from tooth to tooth so the floss is clean for each one.



TIP:

Don't forget the lips! Use lip balm, face moisturizer, or petroleum jelly often to keep the lips from getting dry and cracked.



If flossing is difficult, try these tools.

- Floss holders securely hold floss in place, and may be easier to use than holding floss with your fingers.
- A floss threader looks like a plastic sewing “needle,” and can help thread floss through spaces between teeth or around a fixed bridge.
- An oral irrigator (also called a dental water jet or water flosser) can help clean between teeth and around dental implants and bridges.
- Tiny brushes called interdental brushes are specially designed to clean between teeth.

If the person you care for cannot floss, you will need to floss his or her teeth. Here are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- Find a comfortable position for both of you. One of the easiest ways to floss someone else’s teeth is to have him or her lie down on a bed while you kneel or sit alongside.
- Make sure you have floss, flossing tools, and disposable gloves.
- Follow the same advice for flossing as for brushing to make the person you care for feel comfortable.
- Follow the flossing instructions and use the flossing tools if needed.

VISITING THE DENTIST

The person you care for should have regular dental appointments. Professional cleanings are just as important as brushing and flossing every day. Regular exams can identify problems early, before they cause unnecessary pain. At these visits, the dentist or dental hygienist can suggest an oral hygiene routine that may make it easier for the person you care for. Before each appointment, make sure to have a list of current medications, known allergies, and any insurance or billing information.

TIP:

The dentist may prescribe special toothpaste or rinse to help prevent tooth decay, or a rinse to fight germs that cause gum disease. Follow the dentist’s instructions for use.

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