

Dental care

Good dental care is important for people living with dementia. It helps them avoid potential problems with mouth infections, digestion or eating. It can prevent them from needing more complicated dental work in the future.

Dental work can be hard for the person as dementia gets worse. Alzheimer's and other dementia cause changes in the brain. These changes may make it hard for the person to understand what is happening during a dental visit. They may resist.

Over time, the person may forget how to brush their teeth or why they should. There are things you can do to support the person with their dental care. Focus on what the person can still do. Encourage them. Here are some tips that may help:

Provide short, simple instructions.

Break directions down into easy steps. Give one direction at a time. Instead of "Brush your teeth," ask the person to:

- "Hold your toothbrush."
- "Put toothpaste on the toothbrush."
- "Put the toothbrush in your mouth."
- "Rub the toothbrush on your teeth."
- "Spit into the sink."

Use the "watch me" method.

- Hold a toothbrush and show the person how to brush their teeth.
- Or, put your hand over the person's hand to guide them.
- If the person is upset or does not want your help, try again later.

Do it yourself.

- Use the "Tell-show-do" method.
 - **Tell** the person that you are going to help them brush their teeth. Talk about each step before you do it.
 - **Show** them how you are going to do each step.
 - **Do** the steps in the same way you've explained them.
- Put the toothbrush in their mouth at a 45-degree angle.
- Gently brush the teeth, gums, tongue and roof of the mouth.
- Help the person rinse. Some people have problems with swallowing. If this happens, you can wipe the mouth gently with wet gauze or a soft cloth.

- Clean the person's teeth at least two times a day. Wait until after their last meal or liquid medication dose to do the last cleaning of the day.

Get ready for tooth-brushing.

- Tooth-brushing does not have to happen in the bathroom. Set up where the person will be most comfortable and relaxed.
- Gather all the supplies you will need.
- Have the person sit up. Put a towel over their chest.
- Wash your hands or put on disposable gloves before you start.

Pick the right toothbrush.

- Try a children's toothbrush with soft bristles. It might work better or feel better than an adult's toothbrush with hard bristles.
- Look for toothbrushes that have long handles or an angled head. They might be easier to use than regular toothbrushes.
- Try gum and teeth wipe tissues if brushing is hard.
- Try different kinds of toothbrushes to see what the person likes best. Some people may not like electric toothbrushes. They may confuse or upset the person. But some people may find them easier to hold than a regular toothbrush.

Make sure to clean between the teeth.

- Floss every day to help prevent cavities, tooth decay and infections.
- Some people living with dementia do not like to floss. Try an interdental cleaner. Some people call this a "proxabrush." It is a tiny brush that helps clean between the teeth. Water flossers can also be helpful for some people.

Take care of dentures.

- Rinse them with plain water after meals.
- Brush them daily. This will remove stuck-on food.
- Remove them at night. Soak in a cleanser or mouthwash.
- Use a soft toothbrush or moistened gauze pad to clean the person's gums, tongue and other soft mouth tissues.

Talk with the person's dentist.

- Tell the person's dentist that they have dementia. Help the dentist learn more about dementia.

- Share tips that have helped the person living with dementia with their dental care.
- Bring a list of the person's doctors and medications.
- Keep up with regular dental visits for as long as possible. This will help prevent tooth decay, gum problems, pain and infection.
- As dementia gets worse, the person may not be able to go to the dentist. Do your best to support dental care from home. These tips may help.

Watch out for mouth pain.

- Look for signs of tooth or mouth pain during mealtime.
- The person might refuse to eat. Or they might frown, wince or look uncomfortable.
- This could mean they have mouth pain or dentures that do not fit right.
- If you notice this, talk to the person's dentist. They can check and see if something is causing the person pain.

Be flexible, patient and understanding.

- Help the person to be independent for as long as possible.
- We all have ways we like to do things. This includes the way we brush our teeth. Do things the way the person likes. Do they like to wet the toothbrush before they put on toothpaste? Do they like to spit as they go?
- Take your time. Don't rush the person through a task.
- Put yourself in their shoes.
 - The person might struggle or seem unsure. Let them know that they are safe, they are doing a good job and you are there to help them.
 - Give praise when they do something well.

For more tips, join Alzheimer's Association **ALZConnected®** (alz.org/alzconnected). It is a website where caregivers can ask questions, share ideas and support each other.

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