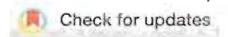


Oral health care tips for caregivers



Oral health care is important for everyone, but some people may not be able to provide this care for themselves. Brushing gently with a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste twice daily and cleaning between teeth daily is the general rule, but some people may be challenged by this routine. Here are some tips for helping others who have trouble with oral self-care.

DAILY MOUTH CARE

Some people may need only to be talked to or shown how to brush and clean between their teeth. Others might need you to take care of their oral hygiene completely.

You may need to adapt the standard routine on the basis of the individual needs of the person you are helping. For example, some people may find it difficult to hold or use a traditional toothbrush. They might do better with a powered toothbrush. For someone who has trouble rinsing or has swallowing problems, try using a toothbrush moistened only with water.¹ And although cleaning between teeth may be challenging, there are a number of “interdental cleaners” that may make this task easier such as prethreaded flossers, tiny brushes that reach between the teeth, water flossers, and wooden plaque removers, as well as dental floss.

Here are some tips for providing hands-on care^{1,2}:

- The National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research suggests trying a “tell-show-do” approach: **Tell** the person how you’ll help him or her brush and what it might feel like. **Show** how you’re going to do each step before you do it. **Do** the steps in the same way that you’ve explained them.
- Before you begin, prepare the work area. You don’t necessarily have to use the bathroom for this activity. Set up wherever you and the person you’re caring for will be comfortable. Have all the things you’ll need within easy reach: toothpaste, a toothbrush, an interdental cleaner, a glass of water, and a bowl to spit into.
- Have the person sit up (or raise the head of the bed), and drape a towel over his or her chest.
- Wash your hands and put on disposable gloves.
- When you are ready, place a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the moistened brush and brush each tooth surface, using short (toothwide) strokes.
- Help the person you are working with rinse with plain water, if possible. If there’s a risk of choking, such as a swallowing problem, you can swab the mouth gently with moistened gauze or a soft cloth.
- Clean between all teeth that touch, using an interdental product as directed.

- The dentist may recommend an oral rinse. If so, have the person you care for swish and spit the rinse out, as directed by the dentist.

People who wear dentures need daily oral care, too. Dentures should be cleaned twice a day and stored in a cup of water when they are not being worn. Any removable full or partial dentures should be taken out before sleeping. Talk to your dentist or dental hygienist about the best way to care for dentures and how best to clean the mouth of the person you’re caring for.

PROFESSIONAL DENTAL CARE

Regular visits with a dentist are key to oral health. The dentist can look for signs of tooth decay, gum disease, or oral cancer. Dental visits also are important for denture wearers. In addition to making sure the denture is fitting properly, the dentist can check for oral diseases like thrush.

People with diseases associated with dementia, like Parkinson or Alzheimer’s, might consider seeing their dentist soon after diagnosis.³ Sitting still for dental treatments might become more difficult as the disease progresses.

CONCLUSION

Providing dental care for another may present challenges, but with time and help from a dentist, you should be able to develop a routine that works for you and the person you care for. ■

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“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

1. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. Practical oral care for people with disabilities: dental care every day—a caregiver’s guide. Available at: <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/sites/default/files/2017-09/dental-care-every-day-caregiver.pdf>. Accessed March 6, 2019.

2. American Dental Association. The caregiver’s guide to dental health. Available at: <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/adults-over-60/caregivers-guide>. Accessed March 6, 2019.

3. Alzheimer’s Association. Dental care. Available at: <https://alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/dental-care>. Accessed March 6, 2019.