

## ORAL CARE FOR PERSONS WITH DEMENTIA

Good oral hygiene can be a challenge for individuals with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Brushing can be difficult due to the person's inability to understand and their resistance to assistance from others. To help the individual:

### **Provide short simple instructions.**

"Brush your teeth" may be too difficult, so instead try: "hold your toothbrush", "put paste on the brush", and "brush your top teeth," etc.

### **Use a mirroring technique.**

Hold a brush and show the individual how to brush his or her teeth.

### **Use a mouth prop to open the mouth.**

If the person refuses to open, a mouth prop can aid in gaining access to the oral cavity, as well as prevent fingers from being accidentally bitten. A tongue blade can be slipped in between the teeth and then turned upright to ease the mouth open.

### **Daily Oral Care**

Look for indications of oral discomfort such as red or white oral sores, bleeding gums, broken teeth or fillings, facial expressions during meal time, or refusal to eat.

### **Individuals with teeth.**

Teeth should be brushed after each meal with a fluoridated toothpaste, and flossed daily. There are many oral hygiene aids and fluoride supplements which can be obtained from a dentist to help facilitate oral health.

### **Individuals without teeth.**

After each meal, dentures should be removed and brushed clean. Each night they should be removed, cleaned, and stored in a cup of water. Brush the gums and roof of the mouth after removal of the dentures. Dentures should be labeled with the person's name so as to avoid misplacement.

### **Regular dental visits**

Individuals with Alzheimer's disease should be seen every 4 months by a dentist. Inform the person's dentist of the diagnosis prior to the visit, so an oral care routine can be developed and proper oral hygiene aids can be distributed. It is also helpful to keep the dentist updated on the patient's other medical problems and any medications (prescription and non-prescription) the patient is taking.

Early detection and prevention of disease is the key to maintaining oral health for the person with Alzheimer's disease. Through their participation in the daily oral hygiene routine, caregivers play an essential role in helping to maintain a clean mouth, noticing any changes or problems, and seeking professional intervention from their dentist.

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"Establish a regular time each day for mouth care. Break up the steps for cleaning into small simple steps for the patient, reminding the person one step at a time. Explain what you are doing in a gentle, calm manner. Place a simple list of step-by-step instructions on a piece of paper and post it in the bathroom, if the person can still read. Keep labeled mouth care supplies in the same place all the time. Do not assume the person will remember the next day what he or she did today."

*From "Providing Dental Care for Patients Diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease", Robert Henry D.M.D. and David Wekstein Ph.D., Clinical Decision-Making in Geriatric Dentistry; Dental Clinics of North America, October 1997.*