

Looking after teeth for children with additional needs

Additional information for parents / carers

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at ndht.pals@nhs.net.

When brushing is a struggle – some tips

- Choose a small, medium toothbrush. Start early on so that your child is used to having something in their mouth.
- Use a smear of family fluoride toothpaste for under threes, and a pea-sized blob for those aged more than three years.
- Do not wet the toothbrush before brushing to avoid dilution of the fluoride.



Position

- A small child may be cradled in the arms.
- Brushing can be done standing behind the child with the head supported or from a seated or kneeling position.
- It takes two people to brush teeth sometimes – one to brush while the other distracts, holds hands or encourages.

Some simple aids for brushing

- A bicycle handlebar grip or foam tubing placed on a toothbrush handle, with a piece of elastic around it, can make it easier to hold.
- Two brushes taped back to back can make a good prop to keep the mouth open.



- A “Superbrush” or “Collis Curve” may help to clean several tooth surfaces at once. They can be obtained on the internet.



- Pump-operated toothpaste dispensers and tube squeezers may help a child put toothpaste on the brush.
- Children with sensory-seeking behaviours and/or dexterity difficulties may benefit from using an electric toothbrush. Choose one with an oscillating head, as they are proven to be excellent at plaque removal and reducing gum inflammation.

If brushing causes distress

- A different area of the mouth can be brushed at different times.
- Other distractions such as music, TV or age-appropriate app on a phone or tablet can be used.
- Brushing teeth in the bath may be easier.
- Choose a time when the child is relaxed.
- Show toothbrushing using a mirror or on a sibling, parent / carer or teddy.
- Reward schemes (e.g. star charts with treats at the end of the week).
- Build up gradually with dry brush to begin with, then a smear of their favourite toothpaste, and then increase the amount.
- If flavours are a problem, use a non-flavoured toothpaste such as OraNurse to improve tolerance.

A strong tongue or tight lips

- Massaging the lips and cheek before toothbrushing may relax the child's lips.
- A flannel or handkerchief wrapped round the forefinger may be used to gently retract or hold back the tongue / lips.

Gagging, retching or clamping

- Start brushing from the front and clean as much at the back of the mouth as the child will allow.
- If your child clamps on the toothbrush leave it in as a prop and use a second brush to clean the teeth you can reach.

- Changing the body position, brushing at a different time of day, or using a smaller brush may reduce these problems.
- A conventional finger guard made of hard plastic may be useful.
- Applying pressure as in the picture below can relieve the gag reflex in some cases.



Problems with swallowing

1. When the mouth is sensitive

- Massage round the mouth and cheeks to improve muscle tone, mobility and saliva flow, and to desensitise the area.
- Introduce a small toothbrush gradually to reduce hypersensitivity, ready for proper brushing.
- Play activities can help mouth function, for example mouth toys, blowing instruments or using a straw.

2. When swallowing is difficult

- To help prevent aspiration – breathing in of water when brushing, tilt the head forwards.
- Use a low-foaming toothpaste e.g. Sensodyne Pronamel, Biotene, OraNurse.

Children who are fed via a feeding tube

There is still a need to think about the health of the mouth for these children.

- Toothbrushing is just as important for children who are tube-fed because:
 - It makes the mouth feel comfortable; mouths only feel comfortable when they are clean.
 - The plaque bacteria can cause chest infections.
 - If the feeding tube is temporary, the good habit is already in place when oral feeding starts again.

Grinding

This problem is very difficult to stop and can lead to tooth wear.

- Massaging the mouth and cheeks for relaxation may be successful.
- Soft or hard acrylic splints may be suggested by your dentist.

Sore mouths

Mouths may be sore because of poor oral hygiene, viral, fungal or bacterial infection, or trauma. This can lead to distress and poor eating.

- Keep the mouth as clean as possible as unclean mouths can lead to more discomfort.
- The cause of the soreness needs to be identified, so a dentist should be consulted.
- Chlorhexidine spray or mouthwash on a sponge is antibacterial and can reduce secondary infection. Beware of staining on the teeth. The dentist should be consulted.
- Anti-fungal treatments can be prescribed by your dentist if this is the cause of the problem.

Seeing the dentist

- It is very important for children with additional needs to see a dentist regularly, starting from the time the first teeth appear. Your dentist may suggest your child sees a specialist.
- Many local health areas have specialist dental services for children with extra needs. They can help with preventing dental problems and with treatment.

If you require information in accessing a local NHS dentist, call 03330 063 300 or email accessdentalhelpline@nhs.net

Useful contacts

Exeter NHS Dental Access Centre

RD&E Hospital (Heavitree)
Gladstone Road
Exeter
EX1 2ED
Tel: 01392 405700

Barnstaple NHS Dental Access Centre

Barnstaple Health Centre
Vicarage Street
Barnstaple
EX32 7BH
Tel: 01271 370562

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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