

Looking after teeth for adults with additional needs

Additional information for parents / carers

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It is very important that everyone is supported to achieve a clean, healthy mouth. Some people with additional needs will require help to brush their own teeth effectively. Others may require a caregiver to brush their teeth for them.

When brushing is a struggle – some tips

- Choose a small, medium textured toothbrush.
- Try to brush every day so that he / she is used to the routine of having their teeth brushed.
- Use a pea-sized blob of fluoride toothpaste containing no less than 1350 ppm of fluoride (this is printed on the back of the tube). Alternatively, your dentist may discuss the use of high-fluoride, prescription-only toothpaste.
- Do not wet the toothbrush before brushing to minimise the foaming of toothpaste and to avoid dilution of the fluoride.



Some simple aids for brushing

- A bicycle handlebar grip or foam tubing placed on a toothbrush handle can make it easier for the person to hold.
- The handle of a manual toothbrush, or two brushes stuck together, make a good prop to keep the mouth open. Another toothbrush can then be used to clean the other side of the mouth.

Alternatively, a 'Finger Guard' made of hard plastic can be purchased.



- Adapted toothbrushes, such as 'Dr Barman's Superbrush' or 'Collis Curve', may help to clean several tooth surfaces at once.



- Pump-operated toothpaste dispensers and tube squeezers may help him / her put toothpaste on the brush.

If brushing causes distress

- Distractions such as music or a TV can be used.
- Choose a time when the person is relaxed, e.g. bathtime.
- Try showing toothbrushing using a mirror, or demonstraing on a sibling or carer.
- Build up gradually with dry brush to begin with, then a smear of their favourite toothpaste, and then increase the amount.
- Try brushing different areas of the mouth at different times, if it is not possible to brush the whole mouth in one sitting (keep a note of which area of the mouth has been brushed each time.)
- Flavours can sometimes cause people to dislike toothpaste. Using a flavourless toothpaste (e.g. OraNurse) may help.

Strong tongue or tight lips

- Massaging the lips and cheeks before toothbrushing may relax his / her 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 person will allow.
- If he / she clamps on the toothbrush, leave it in place to act 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.

- 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, soft toothbrush to begin with, building up gradually over time to using a medium-bristled toothbrush.
- 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 and have a bowl on the person's lap to catch saliva and toothpaste.
- Use a low-foaming toothpaste (one without sodium lauryl sulphate).

Adults who are fed via a feeding tube

Toothbrushing is just as important for adults 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.
- Not all tube-fed people are nil by mouth. Any supplementary food or drink taken orally may contain sugar and/or acids that can cause tooth diseases.

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.

- Sometimes, a doctor may suggest medications or treatments to help relieve muscle spasticity.

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 poor mouth hygiene 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 soft toothbrush is antibacterial and can reduce secondary infection, but may lead to tooth staining over time. A 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 adults with additional needs to see a dentist regularly. Your dentist may suggest he / she sees a specialist.

If you require information in accessing a local NHS dentist, call 03330 063 300 or 01392 822348, or email accessdentalhelpline@nhs.net

Useful contacts

Exeter NHS Dental Access Centre

RD&E Hospital (Heavitree)
Gladstone Road
Exeter
EX1 2ED
Tel: 01392 405718

Barnstaple NHS Dental Access Centre

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

PALS

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