

For Caregivers –

A Guide to Providing Oral Care

Good oral care is important at any age. However, certain segments of the population require special oral hygiene care, including the sick, the elderly, the physically and mentally challenged, and those who are severely learning disabled or medically compromised. A growing number of family members are taking on the demanding role of caregiver, which includes caring for the mouth. Since many of the elderly and chronically ill cannot take care of themselves, caregivers require a special set of skills, techniques and knowledge to ensure their loved ones receive proper oral care. Oral health is important for their comfort, general health and quality of life.



ORAL HEALTH AND OVERALL HEALTH

Keeping the mouth healthy keeps the body healthy, since the two are connected. The micro-organisms (e.g., bacteria) from oral infections can enter the bloodstream or airways and travel to other parts of the body. These micro-organisms have the potential to increase the risk for other health problems such as heart disease, stroke, and respiratory disorders like pneumonia and lung disease. Gum infections may worsen existing diabetes or increase complications associated with the condition.

To help prevent oral infections from gum disease and tooth decay, the plaque bacteria (white, sticky substance) that collect at the gum line must be removed on a daily basis. However, when plaque hardens into mineralized deposits called calculus or tartar, it must be removed professionally by a dental hygienist.

THE ROLE OF A DENTAL HYGIENIST

- See a dental hygienist for regular professional cleaning, assessment and discussion about caregiver concerns. A number of dental hygienists across Ontario provide mobile oral care services. For a list, visit the ODHA website, check the local directory or public health unit.
- In order for dental hygienists to provide proper assessment and care, a medical history form with a list of medications will need to be completed, which can be provided prior to or during the appointment.
- Dental hygienists should be advised of special needs, e.g., access, behavioural issues.

MAINTAINING GOOD ORAL HEALTH

Everyone needs oral care every day. Brushing and flossing are crucial activities that affect general health and are just as important as taking medications, getting physical exercise and eating a balanced diet.

A healthy mouth helps to:

- Promote good eating habits and the ability to taste, chew and swallow food without pain or discomfort.
- Reduce/eliminate pain by preventing oral infections and tooth loss.
- Help people feel good about themselves; improve self-image.
- Eliminate bad breath and the feeling of isolation it may cause.

SIGNS OF INADEQUATE ORAL CARE

- Food debris
- Cavities and root decay
- Weight loss
- Chronic bad breath
- Red, swollen or tender gums that bleed when brushing or flossing
- Tooth sensitivity for no apparent reason
- Loose or shifting teeth
- Abscesses or pus around gums and teeth
- Ill-fitting dentures

ROUTINE CARE AND TREATMENT

- Brush teeth and/or clean the mouth (two minutes).
- Remove and brush dentures daily.
- Clean or floss between teeth and gums once a day.
- Brush or scrape tongue every day.
- Arrange for a professional dental hygiene assessment and cleaning (scaling).

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GETTING STARTED

(May require different techniques and approaches)

Assemble supplies: These include gloves, soft-bristle toothbrush (manual or power), fluoridated toothpaste, a glass of warm water, flosser and a bowl.

Choose a location: The bathroom isn't the only place. The person may be more comfortable sitting, however, when possible use a chair with back and head support. Some people are more relaxed and receptive to treatment if it is routine. Make sure there is good light. Try to use the same technique at the same time and place.

Preparation: Wash hands and wear disposable gloves, position supplies within easy reach; remove dentures.

Communicating: Use a gentle, soothing tone of voice to put the person at ease and reduce any anxiety. An open, honest and respectful conversation will help to establish mutual goals for oral health.

- **Tell** the person what is going to be done and how it will feel.
- **Show** how each step of the procedure is being done; let the person hold and feel the brush, floss and other cleaning aids.
- **Do** the planned procedures in the same order they were explained.



- Find the right position (standing or sitting behind the person) where all surfaces of the teeth are visible and the person's head can be stabilized, e.g., leaning into the caregiver for support.
- Follow the basic manual brushing technique:
 - Place the brush on a 45-degree angle to the teeth at the gum line; flex gently and sweep or roll down from the gum line in a flicking motion.
 - Repeat five to 10 times in each place. Move the brush along in small steps in an organized manner.
 - Brush chewing surfaces in a circular or back and forth motion.
- Or if the basic technique cannot be used, follow the simplified brushing method:
 - Starting at the gum line, use a small circular motion to gently brush gums and all tooth surfaces.
 - Brush chewing surfaces in a circular or back and forth motion, then gently brush the tongue.
- Help the person rinse with plain water and spit into a bowl or sink. Give people who can't rinse a drink of water or sweep the mouth with a finger wrapped in dampened gauze or washcloth.
- For those able to brush their own teeth, there are a number of ways the manual toothbrush can be adapted to improve the grip:
 - Strap the brush to the palm of the hand using Velcro.
 - Use a wide elastic or rubber band to attach the brush to the hand.
 - Purchase a toothbrush with a large handle.
 - Insert the toothbrush handle into a bicycle grip.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOLS

(A dental hygienist can recommend products for different situations and provide instructions on how to use them.)

Manual/power toothbrush: Both are effective. Choose a toothbrush with soft bristles. Caregivers may find that a power toothbrush is easier than a manual brush for cleaning someone else's teeth. Replace the brush or brush head after an illness or when bristles are worn or bent.

Toothpaste: Use a fluoridated toothpaste (pea-size amount) or just water, if the person is bothered by the taste or has problems with rinsing.

Cleaning tools: Floss or clean between teeth daily. There are many different types of floss on the market and all perform well. If traditional flossing is difficult for the caregiver or the client, use a one-handed flosser. Follow the manufacturer's instructions. Other options for cleaning between the teeth include an end-tuft brush, a sulcus brush, proxabrush or a rubber-tipped stimulator.

ORAL CARE PROCEDURES

The person may be able to brush his or her own teeth, which should be encouraged. Others may require some assistance or are solely dependent on the caregiver.

Denture care tips

- Dentures, full and partial, accumulate food and plaque and need to be cleaned daily.
- Commercial denture cleaning solutions do not replace the need to brush.
- Dentures should be brushed thoroughly with warm water and mild soap or denture paste to remove food debris, plaque and germs and reduce odours.
- Do not use regular toothpaste or cleansers that can scratch the surface, and never use bleach to clean or soak dentures as it can discolour and weaken them.
- When not wearing dentures or at night, soak them in water or a denture cleaning solution to prevent drying. Rinse dentures thoroughly in warm water before returning them to the person's mouth.
- Denture cleansers may be toxic if ingested. They shouldn't be gargled or swallowed.

As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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