

## Oral Hygiene

### Introduction

Oral hygiene is a vital part of everyday living. It is something we take for granted and manage very easily. But for those who are dependent, have swallowing problems, or have a PEG, this can present a real challenge.

Mouth care is important, as lack of care can result in discomfort and make someone vulnerable to mouth disease and chest infections. It has been said that 'a sore mouth can cause misery quite disproportionate to the size of the affected area'.

### General Advice

Oral care is required morning, after meals, and at night, for the following reasons:

1. To achieve and maintain oral cleanliness.
2. To prevent infection in the mouth and keep the oral cavity moist.
3. To promote comfort and a sense of wellbeing.

### Advice on enabling you to continue with your oral care

1. Use a toothbrush where possible, at least twice a day.
2. A soft baby toothbrush with very little toothpaste is best. Use circular movements and rinse if possible
3. Use warm water to dissolve mouthwash tablets, as this increases blood flow to the gums, which helps fight infection.
4. Use lip salve such as Vaseline or K jelly for dry lips.
5. Try sipping or spraying of fluid to alleviate a dry mouth.

### If you wear dentures

1. Dentures need the same care as real teeth.
2. Clean them every day with denture paste.
3. Soak them overnight regularly in denture solution dissolved in warm water.

### For Carers

If the person you are caring for is unable to brush their own teeth, you will need to take on this role. Brushing another person's teeth is probably not something you have done before and it may take a little practice.

You also need to check the mouth daily for anything unusual:

1. Mouth pain
2. Sores
3. Bleeding gums
4. Dryness
5. White patches on the tongue or inside the mouth, which may indicate an infection such as candida (thrush).

### **Brushing another person's teeth**

Gather supplies:

1. Toothbrush...spiral or small size with soft bristles.
2. Toothpaste
- 3 Small basin
- 4 Glass of water or alcohol-free mouthwash

- Wash hands or use gloves.
- Raise head of the bed, or sit the person in a chair.
- Ask them to take a sip of water to moisten the mouth.
- Use a soft small toothbrush and small amount of toothpaste to gently brush the teeth, gums and tongue.
- If the teeth cannot be brushed, use a mouth rinse.
- Ask them to rinse well and spit in the bowl. Try to ensure that as little paste or mouthwash is swallowed as possible.

Foam sticks can be used to wipe off toothpaste, and rinse by a dabbing action, if swallowing and facial muscles are impaired.

Mouth washes may be used occasionally to freshen the mouth, but only if rinsing out is possible. This though, is not as effective as brushing the teeth.

### **If you have a PEG**

The tissues of the mouth are more prone to oral disease and discomfort when not taking nutrition orally. Other factors include mouth breathing and use of certain medications which may have side effects.

The procedures for care are the same as above. Keep in mind that the person with a PEG may be liable to coughing attacks, so conventional brushing may be difficult. In this case, a gloved finger wrapped in gauze, soaked in dental gel or mouthwash (chlorhexidine gluconate mouthwash 0.2%), may be used to swab the teeth. There may be some side effects with prolonged use, such as teeth staining or mouth irritation.

If the mouth is excessively dry, try small sips of iced water, atomised water spray, or saliva substitute (ask your GP about Glandosane), can be used.

## **Access to Dental Care**

It is wise to still have access to a dentist if at all possible. Your own dentist or G.P. should be responsible for referring you to a Community Dental Service that would better suit your needs. A referral letter would be sent to the Community Dental Officer with dental history, medication and your consultant's and GP's details

If you are housebound, the local authority may offer access to a hospital dental service, or NHS dentist, who may call and see you at home. A referral has to be made and a visit may take quite a few weeks, depending on waiting lists.

**Dental Health helpline 0845 063 1188** – give advice on dental problems and care.

**NHS Direct 0845 46 47** – for local NHS dentists, or call the local Health Authority.

## **References**

Oral Care Assessment adapted as per recommendations of Heals(1993), Clark(1993), Roberts(2000), supplied by Cynthia Spencer Hospice.

Peg, Policy for Care of Adults in Hospital compiled by South Glamorgan Nutrition and Dietetic Care of the Elderly Group. June 1995

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