

Factsheet

Oral health and MS

Multiple sclerosis (MS) does not directly make you any more susceptible to dental diseases than other members of the population. However, people with MS often have difficulties in maintaining good oral hygiene and accessing care, placing them at risk of developing dental health problems.^{1, 2, 3}

Research suggests that people with a physical disability in the UK may find it difficult to receive a good standard of dental care.^{4, 5}

Why is oral health important?

Good oral health is important for eating, swallowing, smiling and talking. Prevention is the most important aspect of oral care. The most common dental diseases are tooth decay and gum disease. Regular visits to the dentist are essential to help you maintain good oral health and to avoid decay, dry mouth and fungal infections .

How might MS affect my oral health?

Stiffness or weakness of the arms or muscle spasms can all affect the ability to brush and floss properly⁶ or to receive treatment.⁷ Also long-term medications can make it more difficult to maintain oral health either because they cause dry mouth⁶ or are sugar based, causing tooth decay.

Dry mouth

Saliva is important for lubricating food and starts the process of digestion. It helps keep the mouth (teeth, tongue and gums) clean, and keeps the mouth moist to enable clear speech and ease of swallowing. The use of steroids, diuretics and some other medications can reduce the production of saliva and therefore can make eating, talking, wearing dentures and oral hygiene more difficult.^{6, 7} Tooth decay, infection and gum disease are more common in people with a dry mouth. Smoking increases the risk of developing gum disease and a dry mouth.⁹ This is because it reduces the supply of blood to the soft tissues of the mouth. Smoking cannabis can affect the nerve endings therefore masking any sensitivity that may be occurring in the oral

cavity. It is essential to consult your dentist if you have a dry mouth. There are various dry mouth products available, high street chemists will order them although few stock them, GPs can prescribe some, and some are available online.

Antibiotics

Long-term antibiotic use can result in the development of oral thrush. The dentist will be able to give you advice on dealing with a dry mouth, oral thrush and on any problems brushing your teeth.

Nutrition

Dietary regimes that have a reduction in essential elements and vitamins will have an effect on oral health. It is especially important to maintain the recommended vitamin C intake. The eatwell website has tips on diet and nutrition www.eatwell.gov.uk. The MS Society publication Diet and nutrition is also useful.

A word on amalgam fillings

It has been proposed that the removal of dental amalgam is therapeutic for MS. Amalgam, which is composed of mercury as well as silver, copper, tin, and zinc, is used in 80 to 90 per cent of tooth restorations. It is claimed that the immune system and nervous system are damaged by small amounts of solid mercury and mercury vapour that is released from the amalgam. There is no evidence that mercury causes MS or that the removal of dental amalgam improves the course of MS. It has been estimated that amalgam accounts for ten per cent or less of mercury intake. Dental amalgam removal is generally expensive, though there are few risks associated with it. On rare occasions, it may cause injury to nerves or tooth structure.

Advice on attending a dental practice

Any patient with a physical disability may experience difficulty in finding a practice that is accessible and willing to take NHS patients. See below for advice on attending a dental practise. If you require assistance transferring to the dental chair arrange for your carer to attend the dentist with you. Dentists are unlikely to have transfer boards in their surgery. And it may not be possible to recline the wheelchair if you are unable to transfer therefore limiting the treatment you can receive. If your carer is responsible for caring for your oral health then it is essential that the dentist is aware of this. Discuss any concerns you have with your carer prior to the visit. Write them down so you don't forget them. If you prefer the carer can discuss them with the dentist when you visit.

If you are sensitive to light, you may experience problems visiting the dentist due to the light they use. They often have special glasses for you to wear.

Few dental practices have suitable parking or totally accessible surgeries and toilets. If you require any of these facilities you should confirm that these facilities are available. Most practices

will be able to arrange appointment times that will fit in with your need to arrange transport or problems with fatigue. This information can be added to your records therefore ensuring that you don't have to go into detail every time you make an appointment to visit the dental practice. It is important that you inform the receptionist that you will need extra time to get into and out of the surgery. Your dentist may offer domiciliary care where they come to see you at home.

It is likely that you will know much more about MS than your dentist. It is important that you advise your dentist that you have MS and inform your dentist how MS affects you, if you are taking any medication (and update them each time it changes) or have any specific symptoms that may interfere with dental treatment such as spasms. Establish a signal that you can give the dentist to stop treatment if you feel unwell or need a rest.

Overcoming problems

Adaptations

- if you have difficulty in brushing your teeth or dentures ask your occupational therapist or dentist about adaptations that can be made to your toothbrush
- electric toothbrushes can also help
- carers can be trained to assist you to brush your teeth or dentures if you have difficulties doing it effectively

Alternatives

- ask your dentist if you would benefit from using a fluoride or chlorhexidine mouthwash
- If you are having problems with using floss ask your dentist about interdental brushes as they may be easier to use
- chew sugar free gum or have frequent sips of water to increase saliva flow rather than sucking mints or other sweets.
- ask your dentist if you would benefit from the use of a saliva substitute

Nutrition

- lots of snacks containing sugar, high energy supplements or meal replacement drinks can increase the risk of decay
- reduce the intake of sugar in drinks and foods, limiting it to mealtimes if possible⁹
- the acidity of carbonated drinks and fruit juices can affect your teeth by causing erosion of the enamel¹⁰

How do I find a dentist? The best source of information can be to ask friends where they go and if it is accessible. Your local branch may have this information. Alternatively ask your MS nurse or dentist to suggest a practice that is accessible to wheelchair users and those with limited mobility.

If you are registered

- If you can no longer access the practice you normally attend you should consult the dental staff about how you can receive regular dental care. Your dentist should be able to suggest another dental practice that is accessible, provide domiciliary care or alternatively suggest that you are transferred to the community dental services in your area. If you have not attended the dentist for 15 months under NHS regulations you will no longer be registered at this practice as your contract with this dentist automatically expires. The dentist does not have to inform you that you are no longer registered as an NHS patient and is not obliged to re-register you as a patient with the practice under an NHS contract. It is important not to let your NHS registration lapse

If you are not registered

- If you are no longer registered with a dentist it is often difficult to find a dental surgery that is accessible and a dentist that is willing to provide treatment on the NHS, especially if you are in need of treatment urgently.
- Your local PCT may be able to provide a list of accessible practices.
- If you are not registered with a dentist and require dental treatment urgently you should contact NHS Direct 0845 4647 who will be able to locate a dentist for emergency treatments. However, NHS Direct may not have information on how accessible a practice is so you may have to telephone them to ask.

Do I have to pay for dental treatment?

Not everyone has to pay for dental treatment. If you fall under any of the following categories you may be exempt from charges:

- under 18 years old, or 18 and in full-time education
- If you are pregnant or you have had a baby in the last 12 months
- if you or your partner get Income Support, or income-based Job Seekers Allowance
- if you or your partner hold a current Tax Credit NHS exemption certificate from your entitlement to Working Families Tax Credit or Disabled Person's Tax Credit
- if you or your partner are in receipt of Pension Credit
- If you or your partner hold a current Health Service Charges Certificate you may be exempt from paying all or part of your HS Dental treatment costs. You can apply for a HS Charges Certificate by completing a Form HC1 available from your doctor, dentist, optician or social security office. Send it in to

your local social security office on completion where your entitlement will be assessed. Further advice and explanation is on the HC1 Form.

If I am not exempt from the charges, how much do I pay?

Dentists in England and Wales now operate an NHS dental contract. This means that there are now three standard charges for dental treatment. Scotland and Northern Ireland are still operating under the old NHS dental system.

Band one: examination, diagnosis, X-rays, scale and polish.
England: £16.20, Wales: £12.00

Band two: All treatments in band one plus additional procedures such as fillings, root canal treatment and extractions.
England: £44.60, Wales: £39.00

Band three: All treatments in bands one and two plus more complex procedures such as crowns, dentures or bridges.
England: £198.00, Wales: £177.00

When you need to see a dentist immediately, usually for extreme pain, swelling, excessive bleeding or re-cementing a crown. England £16.20, Wales £12.00

Scotland and Northern Ireland still operate the old NHS dental system with no plans to change to the new contracts at present. The maximum charge is £384 for a single treatment.

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9 Watt, R.G et al. (2003) Prevention. Part 2: Dietary advice in the dental surgery. *British Dental Journal*; 195(1):27-31.

10 Rugg-Gunn, A. J. (1993) Nutrition, diet and dental public health. *Community Dental Public Health*; 10(2):47-56.

Useful organisations and other information

NHS online

Find your nearest dentist. You may not be able to tell if the building is accessible, so call the surgery to ask.

Telephone: 0845 4647

www.nhs.uk/servicedirectories

Inland Revenue

To find out about eligibility for tax credits

Helpline 0845 300 3900

Text phone 0845 300 3909

www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk

The British Dental Health Foundation

Working to improve awareness of, and access to, the means of maintaining better oral health.

Telephone: 0845 063 1188

www.dentalhealth.org.uk

Benefit Enquiry Line

For people with disabilities, their carers and representatives.

Confidential advice and information on benefits and how to claim them. In addition they can also send out an extensive range of leaflets and claim packs, and help you to complete a claim form over the phone.

Telephone: 0800 88 22 00 (England, Wales and Scotland)

Telephone: 0800 220 674 (Northern Ireland)

MS Society publications

The MS Society has publications on a wide variety of topics, including information for people newly diagnosed, types of MS, managing relapses, and social services. For a publications list and order form visit the website www.mssociety.org.uk or call 020 8438 0799. (Monday to Friday, 10am-3pm)

MS Helpline

The award winning MS Helpline offers confidential emotional support and information to anyone affected by MS, including family, friends, carers, newly diagnosed or those who have lived with the condition for many years. Information about MS is available in over 150 different languages by speaking to a Helpline worker via an interpreter. Call

freephone 0808 800 8000 Monday to Friday, 9am-9pm, except bank holidays, or email helpline@mssociety.org.uk

Authors and contributors

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Suggestions for improvement in future editions are welcomed

Please send them to infoteam@mssociety.org.uk

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