

Dental Care for Dementia Patients

When dementia progresses, a person's family members or caregivers must pay closer attention to their oral health. Increased confusion, poor mobility, and memory loss can prevent good dental hygiene practices.

For example, a person with dementia might forget to brush their teeth, struggle to hold or use a toothbrush, develop a lack of interest in self-care, or forget to attend dental appointments. Also, they might have difficulty communicating dental pain or discomfort, increasing their need for regular dental exams. Read on to learn more about dental care for dementia patients.

Support Oral Hygiene with Short Instructions

If possible, you must provide a dementia patient with as much independence as possible to protect their dignity. Rather than brushing their teeth for them, you can support good oral hygiene by providing short, clear directions, such as "Pick up your toothbrush," "Add toothpaste to your toothbrush," and "Rub the toothbrush on your teeth."

Choose a Comfortable Setting

A person with dementia might not want to visit a bathroom to brush their teeth, and that's okay. Instead, you can create a set up in a spot they feel most relaxed and comfortable, such as on an armchair in their living room. Ask them to sit up, place a towel over their chest, and provide short oral care instructions. If they can't care for their oral hygiene alone, wash your hands before brushing their teeth.

Clean Dentures Daily

If a person with dementia wears dentures, you must ensure they keep them clean as much as possible. For example, ask them to sip clean water after meals to rinse away food between their teeth, and you must brush their teeth twice daily.

Dentures should be removed at night to be soaked in mouthwash or a cleanser. You can remove dentures with ease by asking a dementia patient to gargle lukewarm water, as it will soften the adhesive sealant. After soaking, gently clean their gums, tongue, and soft mouth tissues with a soft toothbrush or moist gauze pad if they can't do so alone. Daily cleaning of dentures and gums will lower a person's risk of gum disease and prevent pain and discomfort.

Change Their Toothbrush

Changing a dementia patient's toothbrush could support good oral care, lowering their risk of periodontal disease, infection, and tooth loss. For instance, they might prefer a children's toothbrush, as they tend to have softer bristles that may feel kinder to their teeth and gums.

If a person with dementia has limited mobility, they might find it easier to use a toothbrush with a longer handle or an angled head. Also, you might find they find electric toothbrushes irritating or confusing when having their teeth cleaned, but some people may find them better to hold, which may support their independence for longer. If they refuse to brush their teeth, dementia caregivers should provide or use gum and teeth wipes to protect a person's oral health.

Learn the Warning Signs of Oral Health Issues

Despite following good oral hygiene practices daily, dementia patients could still develop an oral health issue that may cause them pain and discomfort. Unless a person is in the early

stages of dementia, they might be unable to communicate their dental health needs. For this reason, you must familiarize yourself with the possible warning signs of oral issues.

For instance, a dementia patient may:

- Refuse to eat
- Struggle to consume very hot or cold food and drinks
- Often pull or touch their face
- Have angry or aggressive outbursts
- Struggle to sleep
- Use non-verbal gestures, such as pointing at their mouth
- Wince when brushing
- Stop wearing their dentures
- Develop a swollen face
- Struggle to perform daily activities
- Refuse **dental care**
- Appear restless or upset

Routine dental check-ups are essential for people with dementia, as a dentist can identify an issue that a patient cannot express. Also, they can recommend tactics to protect a patient's oral health, such as using **fluoride toothpaste** to avoid tooth decay and sipping on water regularly to prevent **dry mouth**.

Look for Dental Disease Symptoms

When supporting a dementia patient with oral hygiene, you should look for potential signs of **dental disease** to avoid tooth infections, dental surgeries, and tooth extraction(s).

Don't hesitate to organize an appointment with a dentist if you notice a person with dementia has:

- Swollen, red, or bleeding gums
- Swelling around the mouth
- Red, cracked, crusty, or sore corners of the mouth
- Creamy white or red patches on the tongue or inside their mouth

The sooner a patient receives a check-up, the sooner a dentist can identify a problem and provide the best treatment for their needs. It will minimize their pain and suffering and protect their quality of life. What's more, treating dental diseases will lower a person's risk of other medical issues, such as **heart disease**, stroke, and oral cancers.

Be Patient and Helpful

It is essential that a person with dementia maintains their independence for as long as possible, which is why you must try to support them with brushing, flossing, and cleaning their dentures instead of completing the task on their behalf. Encourage them to take their time and avoid rushing to ensure they thoroughly clean their teeth and gums.

There might come a time when they may need more help with oral hygiene, and you'll need to show patience and understanding to protect their dignity and self-respect. For example, you should learn how they like their teeth to be brushed, as they prefer for their toothbrush to be wet before applying toothpaste or may enjoy circular motions or spitting between brushing. If they seem confused or unsure, remind them they are safe, and that you're trying to help, and give praise along the way.