



Dental Care for Alzheimer's Patients

In honor of World Alzheimer's Day, learn more about specialized dental care

World Alzheimer's Day

Occurring on the 21st of September each year, World Alzheimer's day was established to raise awareness about Alzheimer's disease and dementia. A progressive and eventually devastating brain disorder, Alzheimer's causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior.

As Alzheimer's progresses, some behavior/memory changes that loved ones might notice are that the person suffering from the condition may not remember to brush their teeth, remember why dental care is important, or may become confused or uncooperative when undergoing dental treatment. As oral health can greatly affect one's overall health, preventive dental care is extremely important during the early stages of Alzheimer's. Preventive care can help prevent not only dental pain, but also eating issues, digestive problems, and infection down the road, when intrusive dental treatment may be intolerable for the patient.

Daily Care

Again, preventive care is of paramount importance in the early stages of Alzheimer's. This preventive care includes getting regular check-ups and professional cleanings as well as brushing and flossing daily. As the disease progresses, oral hygiene and treatment may become more challenging.

If you are caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or dementia who is having difficulty with oral care at home, try following these tips provided by the [Alzheimer's Association](#):

- Give simple, short instructions, breaking down the process when needed: "Pick up your toothbrush", "Put some toothpaste on the toothbrush", "Brush your teeth"
- Demonstrate brushing by holding the toothbrush and brushing for them, or by gently guiding their hand while they brush
- If you must do the brushing yourself, brush in a gentle circular motion, at a 45 degree angle, using a soft bristled tooth brush, for at least two minutes, twice a day
- Floss daily, if possible; try using a proxabrush (tiny, tube-shaped brush to clean between teeth) or floss holder if regular floss is too distressing
- Dentures and partials should be rinsed after each meal, brushed once a day, and soaked in cleanser each night; while the dentures are out, clean the patient's gums, tongue, and roof of mouth with a soft toothbrush or wet gauze



Dental Pain

Those suffering from Alzheimer's often have trouble communicating when they are in pain:

- Look for any signs of sores or pain points while performing daily hygiene
- Watch for rubbing/touching of the cheek/jaw, moaning, and flinching when touching the face, and refusal to put in dentures
- Look for signs of discomfort during mealtime: strained facial expressions or refusal to eat could indicate mouth pain or poorly-fitting dentures

- If brushing is challenging, try using a different type of toothbrush, whether it be a child's toothbrush, longer-handled, or angled toothbrush; be aware that using electric toothbrushes may be confusing for the patient
- If, despite best efforts, you are unable to brush the patient's teeth, do not try to force it - try again later

Not all caregivers are able to provide dental care at home, whether it be too difficult or unpleasant a task. In this case, address the issue with the dentist as they may have the patient visit the office for professional cleanings more frequently.

Professional Care

Every effort should be made to continue routine dental check-ups, cleanings, and treatment while in the early stages of Alzheimer's or dementia. This would also be an ideal time to contact the local dental society to find a dentist who has experience working with Alzheimer's, dementia, and elderly patients. Check with insurance to make sure any dentist selected is in the patient's insurance network.

Make sure to provide the dentist with a list of the health care providers caring for the patient and a detailed medication list. This will allow the dentist to coordinate care with the patient's doctors when needed and screen for any medications that may cause oral side effects.

Some tips for a successful dental visit:

- If you find the patient tends to be more alert at a certain time of day, try scheduling their appointment during this time
- Remind the patient of the appointment at least one day in advance
- Make sure the patient visits the restroom before the appointment
- Ask for clear follow-up instructions and date of future appointments in writing



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