

Dementia and Oral Health

Individuals with dementia are at a higher risk of oral health problems. However, with proper oral care these problems can be treated or prevented, and oral health maintained. Oral care often becomes the responsibility of caregivers as a lack of independence is a consequence of dementia.

This fact sheet describes why good oral health is important for people with dementia and how people with dementia can be supported to achieve and maintain good oral health.

How does Dementia affect Oral Health?

Dementia is a broad term. It includes symptoms caused by different disorders affecting the brain. Memory loss, issues with completing daily tasks and behaviour changes are just a few of the possible symptoms. Memory loss can make it difficult for people to take care of themselves, and carry out basic personal hygiene. This includes basic skills, such as cleaning teeth.

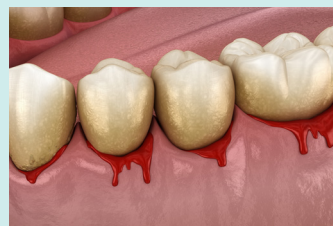
The lack of regular oral hygiene behaviours can create oral health problems or make existing ones worse. Gum disease, tooth decay, tooth loss, dry mouth and mouth ulcers can result in discomfort and pain.

People with dementia tend to have more missing teeth and tooth decay. Missing or loose teeth affect the ability to chew or speak and may affect confidence.

As a result of certain medications people with dementia may get a dry mouth. A person with a dry mouth and insufficient oral hygiene will be at a higher risk for gum disease, tooth decay and (painful) mouth ulcers. This can cause discomfort when eating, drinking, and cleaning their teeth, affecting their overall quality of life.

Symptoms of Oral Disease

The symptoms of gum disease can include:



Bleeding and/ or tender gums



Bad breath/ halitosis



Receding gums



Loose teeth

Building a routine

It is important to maintain a daily oral hygiene routine. If you have been diagnosed with dementia or are caring for someone with dementia it is important to develop a routine that is effective and easy to maintain. Routine and familiarity to persons (carer, family) can help decrease restlessness and agitation. This means less stress for everyone involved: the person diagnosed with dementia and the carer.

It is important to acknowledge personal preferences for taste (toothpaste), tooth brush, timing, supported tooth cleaning, or assistance with tooth brushing. Creativity and patience are the key to success. You might not find the appropriate or most successful method immediately, but when you do, it will be easier to stick to the routine.

Suggestions

Watching and copying can be a useful way to encourage tooth brushing and to build a personable routine. Brushing teeth together or listening to music can enhance a routine.

Electric toothbrushes can make it easier to clean the teeth effectively. Not everyone enjoys the sound or vibration of electric toothbrushes. It is a matter of personal preference.

Try different toothbrushes to explore what you need or what the person you care for needs. Think outside the box. I.e. the Collis Curve toothbrush. Modified toothbrushes can make brushing your teeth or assisting others easier.



Cleaning between teeth is important. Select tools that are easy to use and effective. Interdental brushes are relatively easy to use and different aids can make cleaning with interdental brushes easier (i.e. extender handles).

Irrigation aids can be used in addition to other interdental cleaning aids or when other options are not successful. Adding a mouthwash to the irrigation fluid can offer some extra protection (Fluoride or anti-bacterial).

Denture care is important too. Brush your denture everyday with a soft toothbrush. When finished, store the denture in a safe, dry place overnight. If dentures are not cleaned properly discomfort of the mucosa (soft tissue in the mouth) or infections can occur.

Maintain a healthy and tooth friendly diet. Avoid too many sugary foods or drinks. Water is better than cordial, limit sugar in tea, coffee and other drinks.

Regular check-ups with an oral health professional help to pick up changes in the mouth early. Your oral health professional can support you with specific suggestions to maintain good oral health.

References

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