

How to brush someone else's teeth

A guide for carers of adults with disability





Good oral health is an important part of every person's total health. A clean, healthy mouth can help a person look and feel better about themselves.

Poor oral health may result in pain, a change in behaviour, broken sleep, difficulty eating and other health issues.

Helping someone brush their teeth is important. Every person is different and many ideas are suggested in this booklet. Some of them may help improve the dental health of the person that you care for.

Remember, it's ok not to do a perfect job. The most important thing is that you try.

To help someone brush their teeth, you will need:

1. Toothbrush

Choose one of the following:

- a **toothbrush with a small head and soft bristles**
- an **electric toothbrush**
- a **three sided or surround toothbrush**

2. Fluoride toothpaste

A pea size amount of toothpaste is all that is needed. Discuss with your dental practitioner what type of toothpaste to use. If the person is unable to spit out, then a low foaming toothpaste might be best.

3. Good light

Make sure that you can see clearly into the person's mouth. A camping head torch can be used if necessary.

4. Disposable gloves

If you do not wish to use gloves, clean your hands thoroughly before starting.

5. Bowl or cup

Use a bowl or cup if the person is unable to spit in a bathroom sink.

6. Towel

Use a towel to protect the person's clothes and wipe their mouth.

7. Mouth prop

If the person that you care for is unable to keep their mouth open for a long time, a mouth prop can be used.

If you don't have a mouth prop, roll up a clean, damp face washer. Encouraging the person to bite on it will expose their teeth. This will improve your access and ensure their comfort.

Tools to have on hand



mouth prop

Let's get started

How to safely set someone up

- Find out how the person likes to have their head supported.
- Check with them that they are comfortable and as upright as possible.
- Test several positions that you can use to clean the person's teeth.

Some people find it easiest if brushing assistance is behind them; some prefer the side or the front.

If the person is in a wheelchair, stand behind the wheelchair, and remember to lock the chair wheels and support the person's head.

A fixed and stable head rest support on the wheelchair can be useful. Be alert to the possibility of gagging if their head is tilted back.

If the person is lying down, try to raise or tilt their head very carefully to one side, using extra pillows.



STOP: If the toothbrushing routine isn't working for any reason. Try and work out what the problem might be and see if it can be overcome. Do not force toothbrushing if the person is not ready to progress. Talk to your dental practitioner about different ways to help keep teeth and gums healthy

Important tips:

- Check that the person understands what you are going to do and agrees to each step before you proceed.
- Be calm, patient, encouraging and positive.
- Try and make toothbrushing fun!
- It's good to take breaks if they are needed.



Tips to help brush someone else's teeth

Encourage the person to try to relax their lips and cheeks. This might be best achieved by asking the person to have a swallow and give you a big smile.

Introduce the toothbrush at the corner of their mouth.

The person's lips and cheeks can be gently pulled back, to allow you to see their teeth.

Say which teeth you are brushing. For example, you might say: 'I am starting with your back teeth. I'll brush the top teeth, starting inside and then the outside'.

If you are using an electric toothbrush, simply place the head of the toothbrush on the gum line and move the toothbrush around the mouth to make sure all surfaces of the teeth are reached.



How to brush

Be sure to brush all surfaces: top and bottom, left and right, front and back.

Brush in the morning and at night before going to bed.



STOP: When you have finished brushing, spit out the toothpaste, but don't rinse your mouth with water.



Use a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste on a soft toothbrush.



Brush on the outside of the teeth using a circular motion. Start on one side and go all the way to the other side of the mouth.



Brush on the inside surface of every tooth making sure that you clean down to the gums.



Gently brush the surfaces of the top and bottom teeth. Start on one side and follow all the way to the other side of the mouth.



Flossing tools



floss holder

interdental brush



floss

Brush teeth and gums twice a day – morning and night

If you can only manage once a day, then it should be at night, after eating.

Bleeding gums

If the person's gums begin to bleed when you are brushing their teeth, this usually means that they have gum disease and that their gums need to be **brushed more, not less**. By brushing twice a day, you should notice that the health of their gums will improve, and the bleeding should reduce or stop.

If bleeding continues, you should see your dental practitioner.

What about cleaning between the teeth?

Flossing and interdental brushes help remove food and plaque from between teeth, where the toothbrush can't reach.

It can be difficult to floss someone else's teeth. Try using a floss holder or an interdental brush. Where possible try and do this once a day.

What if someone is refusing toothbrushing?

Try and work out if it's the brushing activity or the frothing toothpaste that's the issue. Try brushing with water first to remove the plaque and then have a quick brush with a low foaming fluoride toothpaste to apply the fluoride.

What about mouth rinses?

Only use a mouth rinse if it has been recommended by your dental practitioner.



Brushing the teeth of a person with specific needs

Dysphagia or swallowing problems

Some people have difficulty with swallowing or dysphagia. Before brushing their teeth, it is important to check their mouth. Do this by using a toothbrush, wipes or swabs to clear away any food. Make sure to check their cheeks. It might be more comfortable for the person to have their head tilted forward for brushing. Try and brush twice a day

with a small, soft, dry toothbrush that has a smear of fluoride toothpaste on it.

You may want to try some toothpastes with low flavour and low foaming properties.

Remove any excess saliva with a clean towel. Be sure to have suction available for toothbrushing if it is regularly used for someone with severe dysphagia.

Dry mouth

Some people have a dry mouth because of the medication they take. Saliva in the mouth has a protective effect against tooth decay. Dry mouth can also make it hard to chew and swallow food. Offer water regularly through a drink bottle or a spray bottle filled with tap water. There are also some products available through your local pharmacy that can help.



Gagging

Sometimes the person may have a strong gag reflex. Try using just a smear of fluoride toothpaste or pouring some fluoride mouth rinse into a cup and dip the head of the toothbrush into it to brush their teeth. You may want to try some toothpastes with low flavour and low foaming properties. A few granules of salt on the tongue can help reduce the gag reflex. In some cases, applying pressure midway between the chin and the lower lip can also help.

Techniques that might help toothbrushing include:

Bridging - have the person hold the same object as you (toothbrush), whilst you are brushing.

Distracting - the use of music, holding items, singing or gentle touch to distract the person from having their teeth brushed.

Hand-over-hand - place your hand over the person's hand to help guide them with brushing their teeth.

Chaining - you can begin the activity and the person completes it.



Let's look at challenges

If you are having difficulties brushing someone else's teeth, try using an electric toothbrush or a three-sided toothbrush. This will limit the amount of time that you are brushing the person's teeth. Some people will take longer than others to become comfortable with daily toothbrushing. You may need to consider a slow, familiarisation process for someone with anxiety or who has oral sensitivities. Try using an electric toothbrush on the person's fingernails first, so they get used to the vibration. Electric toothbrushes are often more efficient for a quick clean.

People not fed by mouth

Plaque and bacteria left in the mouth can lead to chest infections or aspiration pneumonia if not removed every day.

Brushing the person's teeth everyday will help make their mouth feel more comfortable and help reduce bad breath.

Important

Even if a person is tube fed, clean their teeth, gums and tongue every day.



Food and drinks

What we eat and drink can have a big effect on teeth. When we eat foods high in sugar, the sugar and bacteria in the mouth produce acid. This acid weakens the teeth and can cause tooth decay. If we eat frequently our mouths are in a constant state of acid. Instead, try to avoid snacking and give the teeth a rest between meals. This allows saliva to help neutralise acids.

Try to avoid:

- Foods that stay in the mouth for a long time or get stuck in the grooves of the back teeth, like dried fruit, snack bars and biscuits.

- Drinks that are sipped for long periods of time (except for water)
- Soft drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks and diet soft drinks.

Tips to help keep teeth healthy:

- Drink tap water throughout the day. Tap water contains fluoride, which helps protect the teeth
- Choose fresh fruit instead of dried fruit
- Avoid snacking where possible
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Limit how often sweet foods are eaten. Try and have these as treats and limit to mealtimes, rather than in-between meals.



Dental Check-ups

Regular dental check-ups are important. If you notice any changes to a person's mouth or any behaviour changes, especially when you are brushing their teeth, please arrange a dental appointment as soon as possible.



Dental Emergency

Go to the closest hospital emergency department for:

- Swelling in the face or neck
- Bleeding from the mouth that will not stop
- A serious injury to the face.

To access NSW Public Dental Services call: **1800 679 336**

Your local public dental service will ask for your Medicare card details. If you are an adult you will also need your concession card details.



Scan QR Code to view
*'Oral health for adults
with disability – a guide for
carers'* instructional videos.

This resource has been developed in consultation with consumers.

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