



GETTING STARTED.

## **Oral Health Care for Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Alzheimer's Disease, or Dementia**

General guidance to assist dentists and the dental team in providing oral health care for patients with special health care needs



## 1. Know each patient's medical history and challenges.

### What to do before the first scheduled appointment.

Prepare for the appointment by consulting with the patient's family or other caregivers, and physician, if necessary.

To facilitate information intake, consider providing the parent/caregiver with a pre-visit questionnaire to complete before the appointment takes place. There are many intake forms available to use and adapt to your dental practice. [Download](#) this sample Pre-Visit Parent Questionnaire form or visit [www.cda-adc.ca/specialneeds](http://www.cda-adc.ca/specialneeds) to search for this form.

It is important to know key details in advance of the patient presenting for care. These include:

- Mental capabilities and communication skills and preferences
- Behavioural challenges and sensory issues. Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may experience varying difficulties with the following:
  - regulating their attention;
  - impulse control and activity level;
  - interpersonal interaction;
  - learning and memory;
  - expressing themselves orally and in writing; and/or
  - fine and gross motor skills.
- Know who can legally provide informed consent for the patient's treatment.



Filling out forms can be an onerous task for persons with special health care needs and their parents/caregivers. To make a dental appointment a little easier and faster for the patient, consider sending blank forms electronically and request that completed forms be returned in advance of the appointment. This will enable the parent/caregiver to fill out the forms at their leisure and the dental team will have an opportunity to review key patient information prior to the appointment. Patients should be reminded that returning completed forms using email is not secure. Paperwork containing any personal health information should be dropped off at the dental office or sent in the mail.

Based on the patient information, assess how their abilities may affect the delivery of oral health care. Take the information you have available into consideration when developing strategies for making the upcoming appointment a success.

Discuss the services that are available to the patient, and openly talk about any financial issues involved in providing care. Government-funded programs may not cover all costs of care delivery. This may help the patient and their family/caregivers in the decision-making process.

## 2. For patients who are mobile, consider offering a pre-appointment visit to the office or share photos of the office.

For most persons with special health care needs, becoming familiar with the office and staff before the appointment can help reduce anxiety. It can also help to give the dentist and dental team a better sense of the patient's abilities and personality.

Consider offering a pre-appointment visit to the office, or email photos of the office to the parent/caregiver so the patient can become familiar with the surroundings ahead of the appointment.

When booking an appointment, choose a time that meets the patient's needs (i.e., a quiet time during the day, or at the end of the day). Upon arrival, greet the patient with a smile and call them by their name.

Consider directing the patient to the operatory as soon as possible. This may help patients avoid having to adjust to many new surroundings, causing added confusion and/or anxiety. In some cases, it may also be helpful to dim the lights or minimize background noise.



### 3. When the patient presents for care, speak slowly and explain as you go.

Entering an unfamiliar clinical setting can be emotionally threatening for patients with special health care needs. Some may experience a sense of helplessness, anger, anxiety or fear. This is the patient's "fight-or-flight" response to feeling in danger. Recognize and normalize these common fears and responses, and respond in a way to help patients feel safe and reassured throughout the visit.



Some tips include:

- Connect with the patient by making eye contact;
- Use a reassuring tone of voice;
- Be aware of your own body language. As with any patient, persons with special health care needs will sense any discomfort you may have;
- Allow sufficient time for explaining to the patient and their family what you will do and what the patient's experience (including sensations, sounds, tastes, and so on) may be like before starting any work; and
- Use simple, non-medical language.

### 4. Watch and learn to individualize examination techniques.

- Avoid interruptions and distractions by only having essential staff in the operator.
- One of the best ways to do an oral exam is with a toothbrush. Keep other dental instruments out of sight.
- Do not assume that the patient will be comfortable sitting in the dental chair, at first.
- Provide the parent or caregiver with the toothbrush and ask them to show you how the patient normally gets their teeth brushed at home. It may be at the sink, standing up, sitting in another chair or on the floor. This will help you learn how to individualize the examination technique to the patient's personal needs and preferences.
- See if it's possible for the patient to allow you to mimic the brushing technique and to have a look inside their mouth.



### 5. Be flexible and patient. Only do as much as the patient will allow.



- If the patient becomes agitated, speak in a slow, soothing tone about something you know the patient is interested in.
- Be prepared to cut an appointment short if the patient cannot be calmed.
- End each appointment on a positive note.
- Remember, no two patients are alike. Do your best and learn from each visit by customizing care to the patient's needs. It may take several visits before the patient can be fully examined.

## How dentists can support parents and caregivers

Providing daily oral health care to a person with special health care needs can be challenging. Before educating about dental diseases and the importance of good nutrition, first ask the parent/caregiver if they are experiencing any challenges in the oral health care routine at home.

If so, ask if they would like some suggestions on how to meet or help overcome these challenges. If the caregiver/parent grants permission, only then offer helpful ideas for better mouth care.

It is important to present different options to address a specific challenge. After providing a few suggestions, ask the parent/caregiver what they think will work better for the patient. Here are some suggested ideas you can offer to help parents/caregivers improve oral health care at home:

- Demonstrate helpful brushing and flossing techniques.
- Recommend an oral care routine: brushing twice and flossing once a day, always at the same times.
- Offer several kinds of fluoridated toothpaste if the patient is sensitive to textures and flavours.
- Assess how often the patient should be seen at the dental office for care. Visiting the dental office as part of a regular routine, and not only for dental emergencies, can help decrease the patient's anxiety.
- Ask the parent/caregiver if you can show or explain what healthy conditions in the mouth look like to help them determine if they are doing a good job at home. This will also help them identify abnormalities that may require a dental appointment, such as swelling; red or white patches on soft tissues; parts of the gums that have changed colour; and sores that do not heal within 14 days.
- Some patients have very limited or unusual diets. Before seeing the patient and making nutritional suggestions, ask the parent/caregiver to complete a pre-visit questionnaire. Only once you know the patient's background, ask the parent/caregiver if they are interested in knowing more about the impact of their existing diet, and whether they would like any suggestions. Only if/when permission is granted, encourage a more balanced and nutritious diet, limiting sugary drinks and making water the drink of choice.
- Encourage using separate cups and toothbrushes to limit the transmission of bacteria that can cause dental disease.
- Be flexible when scheduling appointments—caregivers typically have many responsibilities to balance and may be available only at specific times
- Share a copy of the brochure *Oral Health Care for Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Alzheimer's Disease, or Dementia: Tips for parents and caregivers*. This brochure provides general guidance and tips to make oral health care as easy as possible at home and between dental appointments.

