



GETTING STARTED.

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

Tips for parents and caregivers to make oral health care at home as easy as possible for persons with special health care needs



## Persons on the autism spectrum

For parents/caregivers of small children: take your child to the dentist for regular check-ups beginning no later than 12 months of age or within 6 months of the appearance of the first tooth.

Regular brushing with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing are key steps to maintaining good oral health. The dental team is trained to recommend a daily mouthcare plan for your child to follow. Here are some tips for making oral health care at home a little easier for you and your child.

### 1. Help them feel safe

Create a safe oral health care environment at home. You know your child best. First, look for any potential issues in your surroundings that may trigger specific behaviours. For example, if your child reacts to bright lights, dim the lights when possible, or move to an area that is more calming to your child. Speak softly and remember to praise your child at every stage of their oral health routine.

### 2. Show them how it's done

Consider brushing and flossing your own teeth. Go slowly, and explain what you're doing, and why. Encourage questions.

### 3. Practice opening wide

Help your child open their mouth wide and keeping it open.

### 4. Get them used to the toothbrush and floss

Before brushing begins, touch the toothbrush to your child's lips, gums and teeth. If sudden mouth closure is a concern, consider using two toothbrushes. Use the handle of one brush to prop open the side of the mouth, and the other brush to clean the opposite side of the mouth. Move on to flossing, if possible. If using dental floss is not possible, try using a water flosser. Go slowly and gently as you explain what you're doing.

### 5. Use an appropriate toothpaste and the right amount by age

Children from birth up to age 6 should be helped by an adult in brushing their teeth. Some older children may continue to need assistance.

Fluoridated toothpaste provides the best protection against tooth decay. If your child is sensitive to toothpaste textures and flavours, have other options available, or speak to your dentist about alternatives.



#### Amount of toothpaste by age:

- Children under age 3: If your child is at risk of developing tooth decay, as identified by a health care professional, try using only a small amount of toothpaste (the size of a grain of rice). Alternatively, brush their teeth using a toothbrush moistened with only water.
- Children age 3 and older: Use a green-pea-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste.



## 6. Let the brushing and flossing begin!

You've shown your child how to do it, now let your child take charge of the brushing and flossing at whatever pace feels comfortable.



## 7. Establish regular routines for brushing and flossing, and visiting the dental office.

- Schedule oral care at home twice a day, and always at the same times. This will help set a simple pattern that your child can follow for a lifetime.
- It's important to have your child become accustomed to dental visits at a young age. Visit the dental office as part of a regular routine, not only for dental emergencies. Doing so can help decrease your child's anxiety about going to the dentist.
- Talk to your dentist about how often your child should be seen.
- Before going for a dental appointment, it is important to identify what you do to help your child feel safe in new or strange environments. Let the dental team know if there are any issues that may trigger specific behaviours. Examples include strange smells, specific sounds, bright lights, or specific ways of touch that either feel better or create negative reactions.
- Your dentist may provide you with a pre-visit questionnaire to capture important details before the scheduled visit. These details help the dental team prepare in making the dental visit as comfortable as possible for your child. Completed forms will contain your child's personal health information. Since regular email is not secure, do not email completed forms back to the dental office. Please drop the forms off at the dental office or send by mail.



## 8. Help prevent cavities

Using separate cups and toothbrushes will help limit bacteria that can cause dental disease. Eat healthy, cut down on sugary beverages, and make water you and your loved one's drink of choice!

## Adults with Alzheimer's, dementia or other developmental disabilities

Maintaining oral health is critical to overall health, especially for seniors. Poor oral hygiene in the elderly can increase the risk of developing dental cavities and gum disease, which can negatively impact their ability to complete normal daily activities. Ask the patient's dental team to assess concerns, such as unintentional sudden mouth closures. They are also trained to recommend a daily mouth care plan to follow. Here are some tips for making oral health care easier:

### 1. Be supportive and encouraging

Start by encouraging the person to come with you to clean their teeth. Explain what you are doing. If they have any concerns, address these as best you can.

### 2. Find a comfortable position

Position yourself behind the person as they sit or stand in front of a mirror, so you can use the same motions that you'd use to brush your own teeth.

### 3. Explain—and soothe—as you go

Explain everything you're doing in a quiet, calm voice and pause if the person seems agitated or overwhelmed. Hum or sing a soothing song.

### 4. Go slowly and gently

Use a soft toothbrush and brush gently. Use waxed floss and a floss holder, applying as little pressure as possible while still cleaning between teeth.

### 5. Don't force it

If the person becomes too agitated, stop. Do this calmly while praising them repeatedly for how much they've achieved. Try again later.

### 6. Cleaning complete or partial dentures

All dentures must be cleaned daily. Scrub the dentures with a brush and liquid soap and rinse well. If there are cracks in the dentures, take them to a dentist for repair.

### 7. Examine the mouth

Check the person's mouth for i) swelling, ii) red or white patches on soft tissues, iii) parts of the gums that have changed colour, and iv) sores that do not heal within 14 days. If the person you are caring for is uncomfortable eating, they should be assessed by a dentist.

### 8. Clean the mouth

After your inspection, clean and massage the inside of the person's mouth with a damp cloth or a soft toothbrush. Finish by gently brushing the tongue.

