

# Home caregivers



## Supporting oral health

**A**s a caregiver, you juggle many responsibilities. Oral care should not be overlooked. Without it, the person you are caring for can develop painful cavities, infections, and gum disease that can loosen teeth and may lead to tooth loss. These oral problems can make eating and speaking difficult and can lead to diseases in the rest of the body, like pneumonia.

### BRUSHING TEETH

Teeth should be brushed twice a day. The person you are caring for may be able to brush his or her own teeth. You may need to show the person how by brushing your teeth first.

If the person you are caring for is going to do the brushing, choose a toothbrush that can be easily handled. The National Institutes of Health has some tips to help make a toothbrush easier to hold.<sup>1</sup> Toothbrush bristles should be soft. A child's brush with a small head may fit more easily in a small mouth. A powered toothbrush also may be helpful.

If you will be doing the brushing, collect everything you will need before starting. You can do the brushing wherever the 2 of you will be comfortable: at a sink, a table, or propped up in the bed. Set up the toothbrush, toothpaste, a glass of water, a bowl the person can spit into (if you are not at a sink), and a soft cloth or wipe to clean the person's mouth and chin after brushing. You also should drape a towel over his or her chest to catch any toothpaste or water. Before starting, wash your hands and put on medical gloves to reduce the spread of germs.

Whether the person you are helping is doing the brushing or you are, the routine is the same. Place a pea-sized drop of fluoride toothpaste on the brush. If the person you are helping has trouble swallowing or spitting, you can skip the toothpaste and use a toothbrush moistened with water. Gently brush all surfaces of each tooth in small circles. Take breaks as needed. Allow the person you are caring for to rinse his or her mouth with sips of water, spitting into the sink or bowl afterward.

### CLEANING BETWEEN THE TEETH

Once a day, clean between any teeth that touch. This can be done with a string of floss stretched tight between the index or middle fingers on each hand. If this is difficult, you might try floss holders or small brushes designed for cleaning between the teeth. Once again, explain what you are doing. Use a

gentle touch. If you need help, contact the dental office where the person you are caring for receives dental care.

### CARING FOR DENTURES

Both complete and partial removable dentures should be rinsed after meals. They also should be cleaned with denture cleaner once a day. You may want to handle dentures over a soft towel or a sink or bowl with some water in it to help keep them from chipping if they are dropped.

Dentures should be taken out during sleep. When they are out of the mouth for long periods, dentures should be stored in a glass of room-temperature water.

Ask the person you are caring for how the dentures feel and if there are any sore spots. If so, or if you see any red spots, see his or her dentist, who can check that the dentures fit properly.

### CONCLUSION

Daily dental care should be included in a caregiver's routine. If you have questions or concerns about this, contact a dentist who can help treat the person you are caring for. ■

### DISCLOSURE

Ms. Mark did not report any disclosures.

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1. Dental care every day: a caregiver's guide. US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. February 2012. Accessed May 7, 2024. <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/sites/default/files/2017-09/dental-care-every-day-caregiver.pdf>