



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Oral Health

Taking care of the teeth, tongue and gums is called oral care. Good oral care is an important part of staying healthy. It is important to prevent oral diseases whether an older adult has natural teeth or dentures.

Examples of how oral health is connected to physical health

Saliva helps to protect teeth and gums from infection. But some types of diseases, medical treatments and medications can lower the amount of saliva and lead to dry mouth.

Diabetes and high blood sugar can make gum disease more likely. Gum disease, like other infections, makes it harder to control blood sugar.

Heart burn can cause sores on the gums, throat, and mouth, and damage the teeth.

Bad oral health can make heart disease and stroke more likely.

Lung infections can be caused when bad germs from an infection in the mouth get into the lungs.

Good oral care also helps to prevent cavities and to keep natural teeth. Keeping natural teeth is best. If teeth are lost, replacing them or using dentures is important for chewing food, speaking clearly and feeling comfortable smiling.

Cost of care

Oral health care can be expensive if a person doesn't have dental insurance and has to pay "out of pocket." Original Medicare does not pay for dental health care needs, but some Medicare Advantage plans do.

Some community health centers provide dental care at a lower cost. Other communities may have volunteer dentists who provide free or low cost dental care to older adults. Local oral health programs for older adults can be found at:

Eldercare Locator, www.eldercare.acl.gov or 1-800-677-1116, or

Dental Lifeline Network, www.dentallifeline.org

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

How to care for natural teeth

- Gently brush teeth twice a day with a soft bristle toothbrush. Brush every side of every tooth.
- Use a toothpaste with fluoride. Fluoride protects teeth from decay.
- Use dental floss or a water flosser to clean between the teeth.
- Visit the dentist every 6 months for an exam and teeth cleaning.

Older adults should drink water regularly to keep the mouth moist. Saliva substitutes also can help with dry mouth. Some dentists may recommend fluoride varnishes twice a year. Fluoride varnish is quick, safe, and gives the teeth extra protection.

How to care for dentures

- Rinse dentures with water after each meal. Brush dentures with soft denture brush every day. When cleaning dentures, fill the sink with water or put a folded towel in the sink to keep the dentures from breaking if they drop. Do not use denture cleaning solutions on dentures that have metal parts. Never clean dentures with household cleaners or bleach.
- Take dentures out of the mouth at night to let the gums rest. Always soak the dentures in cool water or dental cleaning solution. Use only water if the dentures have metal parts. Dentures that dry out can warp and will not fit as well. Poor fitting dentures and wearing dentures all the time can lead to bone loss.
- Clean the gums, natural teeth, tongue and roof of the mouth twice a day with a soft toothbrush or gauze.
- Visit the dentist every 6 months to check the denture fit. Dentures may not fit as well if the person has lost weight.

Care partner tips

Changes in physical and mental abilities can make it harder for some to keep up with oral care. Small changes can help:

- For arthritis, try toothbrushes with large, easy to hold handles.
- For changes in thinking and memory, break the process into small steps. Remind the older adult of each step as it is needed.
- If a care partner must provide oral care, make sure the older adult is comfortable. Tell them each step before doing it. Go slow and be gentle. Stop if the older adult is in pain. Report bleeding or sores to a dentist.
- If the older adult resists care, address pain first. Then try to distract them with singing or have them hold something they like. If this does not help, stop and try again later.

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