

Practical Oral Care for People with Developmental Disabilities

Making a difference in the oral health of a person with a developmental disability may go slowly at first, but determination can bring positive results.

People with developmental disabilities typically have more oral health problems than the general population. Focusing on each person's specific needs is the first step toward achieving better oral health. Determine each person's capabilities and communication skills and how that might affect the person's oral health.

What is the Right Way to Brush?

Proper brushing takes at least two minutes — that is right, 120 seconds! Most adults do not come close to brushing that long. To get a feel for the time involved, try using a stopwatch. To properly brush your teeth, use short, gentle strokes, paying extra attention to the gum line, hard-to-reach back teeth and areas around fillings, crowns or other restoration. Concentrate on thoroughly cleaning each section as follows:

- Clean the outer surfaces of your upper teeth, then your lower teeth
- Clean the inner surfaces of your upper teeth, then your lower teeth
- Clean the chewing surfaces
- For fresher breath, be sure to brush your tongue, too

Discuss the problems associated with diet and oral hygiene, such as eating sugary foods.

- Every person should have his or her teeth brushed twice daily. This can be done by the individual or by a caregiver.
- Ask individuals to show you how they brush their teeth.
- If necessary, adapt a toothbrush to make it easier to hold. For example, place a tennis ball or bicycle grip on the handle, wrap the handle in tape, or bend the handle by softening it under hot water.
- Floss holders and power toothbrushes can be helpful.
- To brush somebody's teeth, find a position that is comfortable for yourself and the individual. Use a small amount of toothpaste, a soft toothbrush and gloves.

Teeth should be cleaned by a dental professional every six months.



Damaging oral habits can be a problem for people with developmental disability, such as:

- Teeth grinding (bruxism)
- Food pouching
- Mouth breathing
- Pica



Inspect the person's mouth after each meal. Remove food from the mouth by rinsing with water, sweeping the mouth with a finger wrapped in gauze or using a disposable foam applicator swab.

Preparing for Every Dental Visit: Your Role

- **Know the person's dental history.** Keep a record of what happens at each visit. Talk to the dentist about what occurred at the last appointment. Remind the dental team of what worked and what did not.
- **Bring a complete medical history.** The dentist needs each person's medical history before treatment can begin. Bring a list of all the medications the person is taking and all known allergies.
- **Bring all insurance and legal information.** The dentist may need permission, or legal consent, before treatment can begin.
- **Be on time.**

For more information:

<http://www.nidcr.nih.gov/OralHealth/Topics/DevelopmentalDisabilities/DentalCareEveryDay.htm>

