

# ORAL HEALTH & AGING



INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS



## BRUSHING

### Oral Health and Older Adults

If you regularly help someone with oral health care, this fact sheet is for you. It offers practical suggestions about how to provide guidance or direct care, as well as tips that may make the job easier. Oral health is important for people of all ages. A healthy mouth helps people enjoy their food, chew better, eat well, and avoid pain and tooth loss. With good oral hygiene and regular visits to the dentist, older adults can maintain their oral health into their later years.

### Brushing

If the person you care for can brush but needs some help or guidance:

- **Encourage self-care.** If the person you care for has problems with memory or judgment, he or she might need reminders. For example, leave the toothbrush and toothpaste on the sink. Or, apply toothpaste and hand them the toothbrush, or brush your teeth at the same time.
- **Encourage thorough brushing.** Thorough brushing and flossing are essential for removing dental plaque, a sticky film of bacteria. Plaque buildup can cause tooth decay, gum disease, and bad breath.
- **Guide the toothbrush.** Help brush by placing your hand very gently over the person's hand and guiding the toothbrush.
- **Adapt the toothbrush or try different types of toothbrushes.** Make the toothbrush easier to use or try a power or multiple-sided toothbrush (see next page).

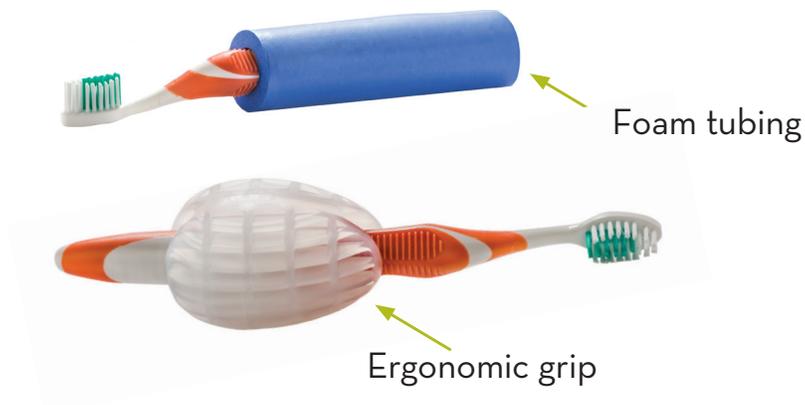
**Make sure the person you care for:**

- Brushes twice a day with a small amount of fluoride toothpaste.
- Uses a toothbrush with a small head, which makes it easier to clean around the back teeth.
- Angles the bristles toward the gumline so they clean between the gums and teeth.
- Brushes gently using small circular motions.
- Brushes all sides of each tooth.
- Brushes the tongue.



Adapt the toothbrush or try different types of toothbrushes

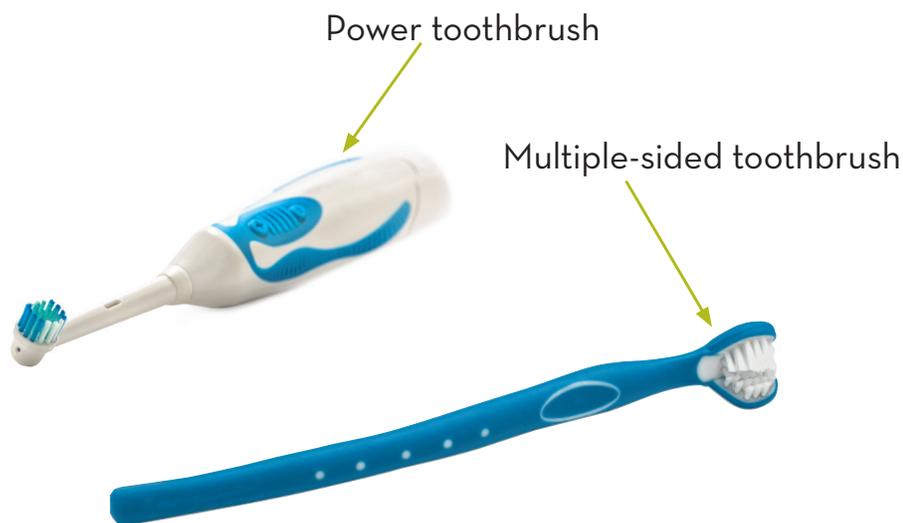
### Make the toothbrush handle bigger.



### Make the toothbrush easier to hold.



### Try other toothbrushes.



## TIP:

If you make the toothbrush handle bigger, be sure to:

- Remove and clean the grip - and clean the toothbrush handle - at least once a week.
- Allow the grip and handle to dry fully.

## Keep the mouth open & prevent accidental biting

### *Foam mouth rest*

- Place mouth rest between upper and lower *back* teeth (follow directions on package); allow care recipient to rest teeth.
- Brush teeth on opposite side of mouth.



If the person you care for is unable to brush, you need to brush his or her teeth.

## Getting Started

- Choose a location such as a kitchen or dining room that allows plenty of space to work. Make sure you have good lighting. Place the toothbrush, toothpaste, dental mirror, towel, bowl, and glass of water within reach.
- Make sure the person you care for is seated in a chair or is upright in bed. Then choose a position for yourself where you can see all surfaces of the teeth and the gums. This may mean sitting or standing to the front or side, or behind the person.
- Ease the person you care for into the situation through conversation, and be patient as he or she gets used to you providing care.
- Use the “tell-show-do” approach. Tell what will happen, show it, and then do the oral care as you’ve explained.
- Have a dental care routine. Use the same technique at the same time and place every day.
- Be creative. If behavior problems arise, use favorite objects or music for comfort.
- Seek the advice of a dental professional for additional suggestions.

## Keep the mouth open & prevent accidental biting

### *Two-toothbrush technique*

- Use large handle of one brush to pull back cheek; allow care recipient to rest teeth on handle.
- Use second toothbrush to brush teeth.



## Brushing the Teeth

- Wash your hands and wear disposable gloves.
- Gently remove dentures or partials.
- Check between the teeth and cheeks for bits of food, swiping the area with a gloved finger or damp gauze.
- Use a toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use a small amount of fluoride toothpaste. If toothpaste bothers your care recipient, brush with water instead.
- Place the toothbrush bristles at an angle toward the gumline so they clean between the gums and teeth.
- Be sure to brush the teeth on all sides using small circular motions, then brush the tongue.
- If the person you care for cannot rinse, give a drink of water or sweep the mouth with a finger wrapped in damp gauze.

## Visiting the Dentist

The person you care for should have regular dental appointments. Professional cleanings are just as important as brushing and flossing at home. Regular exams can identify problems early, before they cause unnecessary pain. Before each appointment, make sure to have a list of current medications, known allergies, and any insurance or billing information.

At these visits, the dentist or dental hygienist can suggest an oral hygiene routine that may make it easier for the person you care for. The dentist may also prescribe a special toothpaste or mouthwash to help prevent tooth decay, or mouthwash to fight germs that cause gum disease. Follow the dentist's instructions for use.

## A word about dentures...

If the person you care for has dentures, remember to:

- Remove at night and brush before putting them into a cup of water (ask the dentist if denture cleaning tablets should be used).
- Rinse and brush dentures again before placing them in the mouth.
- Keep them in water at all times when not in the mouth.
- Change the water in the cup daily.

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August 2018