



Solstice

**A CAREGIVERS GUIDE:
DENTAL CARE FOR
PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL
NEEDS**



Special Needs Dental Care

People of all ages may have special conditions that include, but are not limited to, physical, mental, and medical disabilities, which can bring challenges when trying to care for their teeth. Caregivers may need to provide oral hygiene assistance to people with special needs.

If you are caring for someone with special needs, you know the challenges that come with practicing dental care. It takes planning, time, and the ability to manage physical, mental, and behavioral problems. Everyone needs dental care every day and we know it isn't always easy, but you can make it work for you and the person you help.

Brushing and flossing are crucial activities that affect our health. A healthy mouth helps people eat well, avoid bad breath and toothaches, and feel good about themselves. This guide will go over how you, the caregiver, can properly floss, brush, and maintain good oral health for the person you care for.

LOCATION

The bathroom is commonly known has the place where people take care of their teeth but depending on your location, it may be too small. Try the kitchen or dining room instead, as it may be more comfortable. Sit at a table with the toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, an empty bowl and glass of water on the table within easy reach. No matter what location you choose, be sure that there is good lighting.

RESPONSE

If your client is not responding well to getting dental care, try the “tell-show-do” approach to deal with this natural reaction.

- **Tell** your client about each step before you do it. For example, explain how you’ll help them brush and what it feels like.
- **Show** how you’re going to do each step before you do it. Also, it might help to let your client hold and feel the toothbrush and floss.
- **Do** the steps exactly how you’ve explained them.



Give your person time to adjust to dental care. Be patient as they learn to trust you brushing in and around his or her mouth. Use your voice and body to communicate that you care and give positive feedback often to reinforce good behavior.

Another thing you can do to help your client get comfortable with dental care is having a routine. Use the same technique at the same time and place every day. Many people with developmental disabilities accept dental care when it's familiar. A routine might soothe fears or help eliminate problem behavior.

Some caregivers allow their client to hold a favorite toy or special item for comfort. Others make dental care a game or play a person's favorite music. If none of these ideas helps, ask your client's dentist or dental hygienist for advice.

BRUSHING

If you have dexterity problems or a physical disability, you may find it difficult to hold onto your toothbrush. This can be solved by using a few simple "home remedies" or devices listed below:

- Use a wide elastic band to attach the brush to your hand.
- Enlarge the brush handle with a sponge, rubber ball or bicycle handle grip.
- Lengthen the handle with a piece of wood or plastic such as a ruler, popsicle stick or tongue depressor.
- Use an electric toothbrush



If the person you care for is unable to brush, these suggestions might be helpful:

- First, wash your hands and put on disposable gloves. Sit or stand where you can see all of the surfaces of your clients teeth.
- Be sure to use a regular or power toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use a pea-size amount of toothpaste with fluoride, or none at all. Depending on whether your client likes the taste or the toothpaste is bothering them because they have swallowing problems, brush with water instead.
- Brush the front, back, and top of each tooth. Gently brush back and forth in short strokes.
- Gently brush the tongue after you brush the teeth. Help the person rinse with plain water.
- Give people who can't rinse a drink of water or consider sweeping the mouth with a finger wrapped in gauze.

Keep in mind to replace the toothbrush every three months or when bristle are worn out.



FLOSSING

Flossing cleans between the teeth where a toothbrush can't reach. Many people with disabilities need a caregiver to help them floss. Flossing is a tough job that takes a lot of practice. Waxed, unwaxed, flavored, or plain floss all do the same thing. The following instructions work for individuals with special needs who are capable of flossing without assistance or for caregivers who will be flossing their clients teeth.

- Use a string of floss 18 inches long. Wrap that piece around the middle finger of each hand.
- Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand.
- Start with the lower front teeth, then floss the upper front teeth. Next, work your way around to all the other teeth.
- Work the floss gently between the teeth until it reaches the gumline. Curve the floss around each tooth and slip it under the gum. Slide the floss up and down. Do this for both sides of every tooth, one side at a time.
- Adjust the floss a little as you move from tooth to tooth so the floss is clean for each tooth.

If you have trouble using the floss with your fingers, try using a floss holder tool instead and follow the steps.

REMEMBER

Brushing and flossing every day and seeing the dentist regularly can make a significant difference in a persons quality of life. If you have questions or need more information, talk to a dentist who has had experience working with special needs patients.