Oral Health



Oral health, or oral hygiene, refers to mouth care.
It is important for overall health, wellbeing, comfort and enjoyment while eating.

Oral disorders are the most common chronic diseases. They include cavities, gum disease, and oral pain. They are also linked to other chronic health conditions, such as stroke, cardiovascular disease, COPD, Alzheimer's, and more. Poor oral health can also lead to reduced social interaction and low self-esteem, across the life span.

Aspiration is when food, fluids or saliva get near, or into, the lungs. Aspiration can carry bacteria into the lungs. This can cause a chest infection called **aspiration pneumonia.** Bacteria grows easily in the mouth because it is warm and moist. The thin, sticky layer of bacteria that coats the teeth, gums, and tongue, called **biofilm**. Biofilm is normal and starts to form soon after we clean our teeth. It is important to remove it regularly before it builds up and causes problems.

Good oral health reduces the amount of bad bacteria and biofilm in your mouth.
This significantly reduces the risk of oral disorders and aspiration pneumonia.

What does good oral care look like?

When:

- Clean the mouth twice every day, or as recommended by the healthcare provider.
- For people at risk of aspiration, this should be *before* eating/drinking in the morning (to remove biofilm build up), and before bed in the evening (to clean the mouth before sleep).

How:

- Use a toothbrush (manual or electric) and toothpaste. Clean all mouth surfaces using gentle, short strokes. This includes the gums, roof of mouth, and the tongue.
- If spitting is difficult use a low foam, low fluoride toothpaste designed for swallowing difficulties.



What:

- It can be more comfortable to use a 'soft' toothbrush. Some people find a small, baby toothbrush easier to have in your mouth. This can also be helpful if opening the mouth wide is difficult.
- It is important to use toothpaste, and not just water with a toothbrush.
- If aspiration is a risk, dysphagia specific products are recommended. They are designed to minimise bacterial biofilm, they are mild in flavour, and they are safe to swallow. They also support symptoms of a dry mouth (xerostomia). They are available as toothpastes, mouth washes, or moisture sprays.
    - Oral 7
    - Biotene
- Toothbrushes should be changed every 2 months and after illness.
- Toothettes are **not** recommended.

Dentures:



- Oral hygiene is just as important if you wear dentures or have no teeth.
- Clean your tongue and gums twice daily with a soft toothbrush and toothpaste.
- Remove your dentures every night. Wash them following your dentist's guidelines.
- If they do not fit well, visit your dentist.
- Don't sleep with your dentures in.

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Problem solving and tips:

Difficulty with opening the mouth:

- Electric toothbrushes need smaller movements inside the mouth, so this can help when it is hard to open the mouth wide.
- Smaller, baby toothbrushes can also be used.

Difficulty with swallowing:

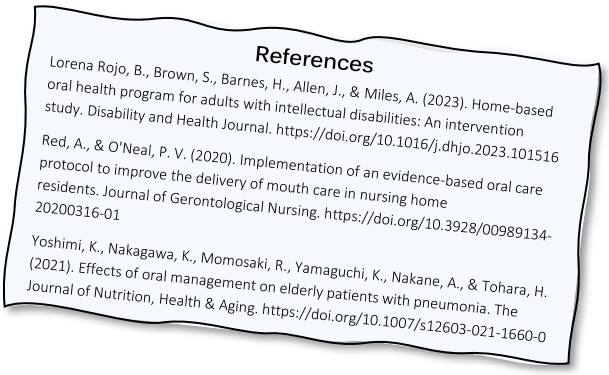
- Dysphagia toothpastes are safe to swallow and froth less.

Difficulty with the person biting down during brushing:

- Try to reduce the sensory input that may be triggering a bite reflex. You can do this by:
    - Using a small soft toothbrush.
    - Proceeding carefully and slowly.
    - Use mild toothpastes.

When caring for others:

- Help them be as involved as possible. This could be:
    - choosing which toothpaste that day;
    - holding the toothbrush to put toothpaste on;
    - doing the first or last part of the tooth brushing;
    - holding your wrist or hand while you brush their teeth.
- Holding the toothbrush together can be helpful for some people. It can help them to be involved and to recognise the movements they are using during oral cares. Hand-over-hand support should be advised by a professional to make sure it is done safely and in the smallest possible way.
- Invest in training for caregivers: effective oral cares is vital, but is not always straight forward.
- The website **brushmyteeth.ie** has helpful videos for different types of toothbrush and support needed.



References

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Dislike of oral cares:

- Be flexible about where oral cares take place: a sofa, or bed, may be more comfortable.
- Play music if this helps create a relaxing atmosphere. Singing a brushing teeth song to children can help them understand the routine.
- Use **now → next** visuals to support understanding about the routine, and positive reinforcement.

Dry mouth:

- Trial products designed for dry mouth difficulties (xerostomia)
- Have water available and sip throughout the day
- You can also read our handout **Managing A Dry Mouth** for more tips

Oral thrush

Oral thrush (or oral candida) is a fungal infection that appears as white bumps on the tongue and/or inner cheeks. It can travel into other parts of your body, so it is important that it is treated.

People who can be at a greater risk of developing oral thrush are:

- People with a dry mouth
- People with reduced saliva control
- The elderly
- People who wear dentures
- Immunocompromised people
- People who have had recent cancer treatments.

Treatment:

- ✓ Prescription treatment must be used in the correct way (it may be a lozenge, cream, or rinse)
- ✓ Replace your toothbrush and denture brush at the beginning and end of treatment
- ✓ Avoid mouthwashes that contain alcohol. Oral 7 products are recommended.