



Extra Help for Caregivers – Dental Care

Dental cavities and gum disease occur more frequently in persons with IDD than in the general population. Toothbrushing can present a problem for many persons with IDD. Many are sensitive or fearful to dental care. Special attention and extra help may be needed to achieve adequate dental hygiene in this population.

If a person is struggling with toothbrushing, consider options to:

1. Create a comfortable setting,
2. Try types of toothbrushes
3. Try different toothpaste,
4. Practice and build skills bit by bit.



1. Create a comfortable setting:

- Find a comfortable place. It doesn't need to be in a bathroom.
- Let the person be in a comfortable position, such as seated at a table.
- If you aren't near a sink, have a bowl available in case you need it.
- Brush your teeth together or model how to do it as a caregiver.
- Make it a game – play or sing a song. Songs at <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/kids-brushing-playlist>
 - Elmo from Sesame Street sings (video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxMrtK-kYnE&t=16s>
 - Sing these words to the tune of Jingle Bells:
*Brush your teeth,
Brush your teeth,
Give your teeth a treat.
Brush up and down and all around,
To keep them clean and neat!*
- Use a timer. Set it for 2 minutes.
- Call out the moves from one part of mouth to the next.
 - Top right, top front, top left – outside, top, inside for each
 - Bottom left, bottom front, bottom right – outside, top, inside for each.
- Phones apps can gamify toothbrushing. Examples are Brush DJ, Toothsavers, Aquafresh Brush time, Brushy and Chomper Chums.
 - Disney Magic Timer app syncs with Crest or Oral-B Pro-Health Stages. See how it works at <http://www.oralb.com/stages/disney-timer-app> ,
- Consider if a reward might be motivating like a sticker or a favorite activity. Use the “If-Then” technique, saying “If” you brush your teeth now, “then” we can do that thing that you want to do.





2. Try types of toothbrushes: Consider other ways to wipe or clean.

- Standard toothbrushes come in lots of varieties like soft or firm, and small or large heads.
- Curved heads, surround heads and three-sided heads all get at more areas of the teeth in less time.
- Silicone has a different sensation than nylon bristles.
- Motorized are helpful with creating more movement on the teeth to clean better for those with less dexterity.
 - Happi Teeth 360 Degree Electric Toothbrush
- Foam grips help with handling the smaller handles of toothbrushes for those with dexterity issues.
- Musical or light-up toothbrushes help gamify brushing.
- Web-based apps are available for some models that connect with your phone to give you feedback on your brushing.
- Sometimes oral swabs are a tool to use while you are working with a person who is still resistant to using the toothbrush.

3. Try different toothpaste: Consider taste, texture, and smell.

- Taste - Toothpaste comes in mint, strawberry, bubblegum and other flavors, as well as unflavored.
- Foam-less paste is usually made without an ingredient like sodium laureth sulfate that usually causes the foaming.
 - Many of the non-foaming do not have fluoride which is important for cavity prevention. Mineral pastes with hydroxyapatite is an alternative that has some but less of the properties of fluoride.
- Dental powder has a different texture and often does not foam or have fluoride.
- Pumps make dispensing toothpaste easier for some.
- Ask your dentist if you need a fluoride rinse, if you are using a non-fluoride toothpaste. Mouthwash can be an additional help but does not replace brushing. Use mouthwash by gargling and spitting, not swallowing. Some people with IDD find this difficult. Ask the dentist for recommendations about which rinses to choose for each person's specific needs.

4. Practice and build skills bit by bit, in steps:

Behavior therapists and occupational therapists are experts in building skills. Get help from them.

If all efforts at toothbrushing are still received with resistance, starter activities may be ways to decrease fears and desensitize to unpleasant feelings. Use rewards and praise





for attempts and steps forward. Make this a fun practice and do it separately from when you actually brush teeth. Don't force it. If you know which actions are the most difficult, wait to do those and do the easy parts first.

- Practice opening your mouth together and looking at your teeth in a mirror.
- Touch any of your own teeth with your finger in the mirror. Do this together.
- Try to count as many teeth as you can by each person touching their own teeth.
- Try having the person wipe a few teeth up and down or in small circles. The front ones might be the easiest to start. Once those are easy to do, try ones further back.
- You can wipe with a toothbrush. If toothbrushes are a problem, try a washcloth or mouth sponge or even the person's own finger.
- Taste toothpaste by putting a little on one's own finger first and taste it.
- Try using a floss pick. Flossing is a different sensation for those with sensory concerns.
- Try using a water pick as another alternative to get between teeth without needing to get a brush or floss in the mouth.

Here are videos from the Missouri Division of Developmental Disabilities about caregiver support in oral hygiene:

- **How to Assist a Person with IDD with oral hygiene**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sZZiR4LQRA>
- **Special Circumstances** addresses persons with more resistance to brushing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuvqAF1YfE0>

