

Tips for Careworkers: Oral Care



What it is: Oral health covers the ability to eat, speak and socialise without discomfort or active disease in the teeth, mouth or gums.

Why it matters: People in need of palliative care or at the end of life often have poor oral health. Treatment for cancer can cause poor oral health. Good oral health is important to quality of life and wellbeing. It affects the person's ability to eat, speak and interact with others. Oral care provided by careworkers helps.

What I need to know: Poor oral and dental health can be associated with:

- dry mouth (xerostomia)
- bad breath
- bleeding gums, tooth decay and tooth loss
- being withdrawn and behaviour changes
- pain and discomfort
- swallowing and nutritional problems, and weight loss
- speech difficulties and problems with social interactions
- increased risk of respiratory infection or other infections.

Whether the older person has natural teeth or dentures, it is important to keep a good routine for cleaning the teeth, mouth and lips. The person may not say if they have pain or discomfort. Look for signs including pulling at face, chewing at lip or tongue or not eating.

Do

Remember when cleaning the mouth to:

- give explanations and allow time for the person to respond
- maintain regular routines in a quiet environment
- use a soft toothbrush which can be bent or a mouth swab
- always rinse the mouth with water
- ask the person to copy your actions of brushing or help the person brush their teeth
- use props to distract the person's hands while you gently brush their teeth
- ask a colleague or a dental hygienist to help.

Do

For denture care (false teeth):

- label dentures and soak in cold water
- use a denture brush for cleaning dentures morning and night
- encourage the person to remove dentures overnight if this is what they usually do
- encourage the person to remove dentures after each meal and rinse mouth with water.

Do

Report to the nursing/supervisory staff any changes in a person's mouth, teeth or lips or any pain or discomfort with oral care. Ask about the Oral Health Assessment Tool (OHAT).

Name:

My reflections:

What are three signs of poor oral health?

What can I do to make cleaning of the mouth easier for a person?

My notes:

See related palliAGED Practice
Tip Sheets:
Advanced Dementia
Nutrition and Hydration
Dysphagia

For references and the latest version of all Tip Sheets visit
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