



Oral hygiene in the last days of life

A practical guide to performing mouthcare

Information for relatives and carers

Produced by the West Suffolk Foundation Trust Palliative Care Team, with the kind permission of South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation Trust, Barnsley Hospice, Barnsley Hospital NHS Trust, Sheffield Hallam University and the Independent care homes sector.

We recognise that this can be a difficult time for family and care givers and that you may want to be involved in their mouth care. If you are not comfortable with doing this, that is ok too.

Good mouth care can help with comfort, cleanliness and dignity. It can also improve a dry mouth and relieve thirst. The following information can help you in giving good mouth care.

This guide includes:

- Denture removal
- Denture cleaning – the do's and don'ts
- Performing mouth care when the person is unconscious or semi-conscious
- Performing mouth care when the person is conscious

Dental removal

How to remove dentures from someone's mouth

- If able, encourage the person to remove their own.
- Remove lower denture first:
Use first finger and thumb, grasp the middle 'teeth' lifting the dentures upwards and gently rotating out of the mouth.
- Then remove upper denture:
Use first finger and thumb to grasp the middle 'teeth' pulling it downwards and gently rotating it out of the mouth.
If difficult to remove the upper denture try tilting it forward.
- Remember to support the person's head.

Denture cleaning: Do's and Don'ts

- ✓ Do remove dentures if causing discomfort/distress or poor/loose fit.
- ✓ Do clean dentures everyday with mild soap and water (or plain water), but ideally after every meal.
- ✓ Do clean dentures with a toothbrush (use a different toothbrush to clean any natural teeth that they may have).
- ✓ Do clean dentures over a bowl of water or towel to prevent them breaking if dropped.

- ✓ Do read and follow manufacturers guidelines when using denture sterilising tablets. Soaking is usually 3 - 6 minutes, and then solution disposed of, the solution should not be used to soak dentures in overnight.
- ✓ Do rinse the denture well with cold water.
- ✓ Do store dentures dry overnight in a denture pot, there is no need for water or any other solution.
- ✗ Don't use disinfectant or bleach to clean dentures as it makes them brittle and leaves an unpleasant taste.
- ✗ Don't use ordinary toothpaste on dentures as it causes scratches.

Performing mouthcare when the patient is conscious

We advise using:

- A small headed soft bristled toothbrush (such as paediatric/children's toothbrush).
- Drinking water and tumbler
- Paper tissue or towel

Preparation

- Where possible, encourage the person to carry out their own oral care. If they are unable to do this, they may need you to help.
- If you are helping, let them know that you are going to clean their teeth and mouth.
- If you are a health or social care professional and are assisting, wash and dry hands thoroughly and wear disposable gloves and apron.
- If possible, the person's teeth should be brushed at a time when they are relaxed.
- Make sure the person is seated comfortably with their head supported. If they are in a seated position, it is a good idea to stand to the side of them.
- Check and see what the mouth looks like and discuss with a nurse/healthcare professional if you have any concerns.
- Ask if they have had any changes in taste, colour, consistency, pain, discomfort or difficulty swallowing. Discuss with the nurse/healthcare professional if any of these are a concern.
- Encourage them to remove and clean dentures. If they are unable to do this, you may need to help them.

How to do it:

- Water is not needed at any point when *cleaning* teeth.
- Apply a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste to a *dry* toothbrush.
- Gently brush the person's teeth and gums using a small circular action and vibrating motion.
- If gums bleed, do not panic, continue to gently brush to remove plaque and reduce bleeding. Gently brush the tongue starting from the tip and work towards the middle.
- Encourage the person to spit out after brushing. Assist in wiping the person's mouth and face when finished.
- Clean the toothbrush with clean water and allow to air dry by standing it upright.

Performing mouthcare when the patient is unconscious or semi-conscious

We advise using:

- A small headed soft bristled toothbrush (such as paediatric/children's toothbrush).
- If using toothpaste this should be one that does not foam (please ask the nurse/ healthcare professionals for further information, but examples include Oralieve or Sensodyne).
- Paper tissue or towel

Preparation

- Talk to the person and let them know that you are going to clean their teeth and mouth.
- Wash your hands and dry thoroughly.
- If you are a professional carer, wear disposable gloves and apron.
- The person needs to be in the best and most comfortable position possible. Support the upper body and head using pillows or raise the head of the bed. If you're unsure ask a nurse/healthcare professional to give you advice on positioning
- If the person is wearing dentures, see information on how to remove and clean them.
- The tongue, gums, roof of mouth and inside of cheeks will still need cleaning.

- Check and see what the mouth looks like and discuss with a nurse/healthcare professional if you have any concerns

How to do it

- Use a smear of non-foaming toothpaste on a dry toothbrush, or if you are concerned about using toothpaste and don't have a non-foaming toothpaste, dip the toothbrush in clean water and shake off excess water.
- Gently brush the person's teeth and gums using a small circular action and vibrating motion.
- Brush from the tip of the tongue and work towards the middle of the tongue. Don't place the toothbrush too far back as this may cause the person to gag.
If the person clamps down on the toothbrush, don't panic. Keep hold of the toothbrush and do not pull vigorously. Wait for the jaw to relax before gently removing the toothbrush.
- Clean the roof of the mouth and inside of the cheeks gently using the toothbrush.
- Use a towel to wipe the person's mouth if any water dribbles.
- If prescribed, apply dry mouth moisturising gel e.g. Biotene Oral Balance gel® or Oralieve®, to the tongue, lips and roof of mouth using the toothbrush. If you're unsure of how to do this, please seek advice from a nurse/healthcare professional.
- Clean toothbrush with clean water and allow the toothbrush to air dry by standing it upright.
- Wash your hands and dry thoroughly using a clean towel.

