



Dental Care

Dental care is an important component of general health. Understanding how to implement proper dental practices can make a big difference in the overall health and well-being of those you serve. People who have Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities (IDD) typically experience more oral health problems than the general population. Poor dental care can lead to poor nutrition and impact an individual’s overall health. Preventative dental care is vital to maintaining oral health. When we take good care of our teeth, they can last us our entire lifetime.

Current Statistics

California

- **20%** of adults with IDD reported that they had not had a dental exam in the past year. This rose to **39%** during the pandemic.
- On average, **16%** of family members said that their family member with IDD experienced oral health or other dental problems.
- Dental expenses have been a consistent out-of-pocket cost for the majority of children and adults with IDD.

Source: CA National Core Indicator Survey data [FY 18-19](#) & [FY 19-20](#)

United States

Although there are limited dental data for the IDD population in the U.S., Special Olympics athlete data can provide us with some information about dental needs for people that have IDD.

- **47%** have signs of gum disease.
- **25%** have untreated tooth decay.
- **9%** received an urgent dental referral.
- **12%** have mouth pain.

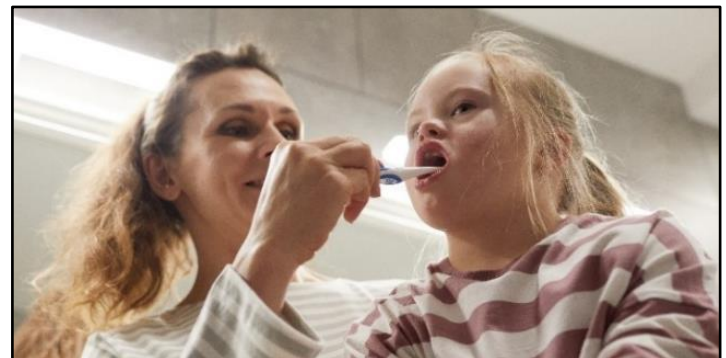
Source: [Special Olympics](#)

Signs Someone Should See the Dentist

- Pain, sensitivity, or toothaches.
- Sensitive, bleeding, infected, or inflamed gums.
- Trouble eating.
- Dry mouth.
- Jaw pain.
- Spots, sores, or lumps in or around the mouth, head or neck area.
- Missing, loose, or separating teeth.
- Unusual behavior (e.g. hitting face or biting).
- Persistent bad breath or bad taste.
- Partials or dentures that are not fitting well or causing pain or discomfort.



Source: DDS Clinical Services



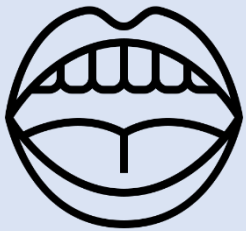
Medications and Dental Care

Medications can negatively affect teeth. Dentists should be aware of an individual's most recent medical history and the medications currently being taken by the individual (including vitamins, supplements, prescriptions, and over-the-counter medications) as these could be contributing to oral health problems or future complications in dental care.

Dental problems caused by medications:



- Abnormal bleeding
 - Aspirins and anticoagulants can cause bleeding problems during oral surgery treatment.
- Taste-altering
 - Cardiovascular agents, central nervous system stimulants, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, respiratory inhalants and smoking-cessation products can affect tasting ability and can cause a bitter or metallic taste.
- Soft-tissue reactions
 - Blood pressure, immunosuppressive, oral contraceptive, and chemotherapy medications can cause oral sores in the mouth.
- Enlarged gum tissue
 - Antiseizure medications and immunosuppressant drugs have been associated with enlarged gum tissue. Calcium channel-blockers and contraceptives or hormonal medications can also cause gingival enlargement.
- Dry mouth
 - This is commonly seen in individuals with anxiety, autoimmune and endocrine conditions, and non-oral feeding.
 - Many medications can dry out the mouth which leads to irritation of the soft tissues and increased susceptibility to infection, plaque accumulation, and cavities.
 - Ask the doctor or pharmacist if dry mouth may be a concern while the individual is taking those medications.



Other considerations:

- Sugar is a common ingredient in oral medications. People taking sweetened medications long-term may be at a higher risk of developing tooth decay. If possible, talk with the individual's doctor about switching to sugar-free alternatives and have the individual take medications with meals.
- Any necessary dental work should be done prior to undergoing cancer treatments that could affect the teeth, gums, or jawbone.



Source: DDS Clinical Services



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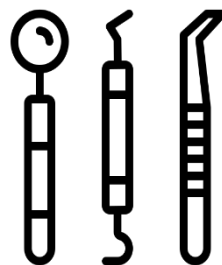
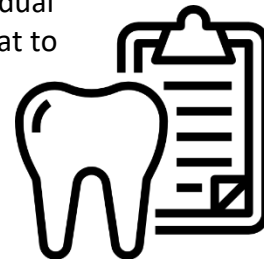
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People Who Experience the Following are at a Higher Risk for Dental Problems

- Tube feeding.
- Smoke or tobacco use.
- Medications that affect the mouth or teeth.
- Poor diet.
- Neuromuscular problems.
- Cardiac disorders.
- Gastroesophageal reflux.
- Seizures.
- Diabetes.
- Dry mouth.
- Cognitive impairment.
- Emotional stress/depression.
- Osteoporosis.
- Compromised immune systems.
- Older age.
- Chronic diseases.
- Self-injurious behaviors (oral related).

Preparing for Dental Visits

- Inform dental team about any special needs of the individual that you support.
- Help familiarize the individual that you support with what to expect before treatment begins.
- Know the dental history of the individual that you support and inform the dental team.
 - Bring any important medical documents to the dental appointment.
 - Bring complete and updated insurance and billing information to appointment.



Source: DDS Clinical Services

Special Considerations

- **Individuals on tube feedings** still require daily dental hygiene. Even if someone is not consuming food or drinks through their mouth, bacteria in the form of plaque adheres to the surface of teeth every day. Individuals with tube feeding typically receive a lot of minerals which results in a large buildup of tartar and requires brushing at least twice a day.
- People that have **neuromuscular problems** may experience challenges that complicate oral care due to their persistently rigid or loose muscles of the mouth. Problems with drooling, gagging, and swallowing can also require specialized attention and assistance when receiving dental care.
- Mouth props are tools that can be used to prop the mouth open during brushing.



Source: DDS Clinical Services



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Supporting Individuals Practice Good Dental Care

- Remind the individual to brush twice a day for 2 minutes. Set a timer or some music that lasts 2 minutes.
- Floss daily.
- Adaptive toothbrushes and floss holders can help if the individual has trouble holding those items.
- Replace the toothbrush when bristles fray or at least every 2 to 4 months.
- Remind the individual to brush along the gum line at a 45-degree angle to target food and bacteria concealed between the teeth and gums
- Help the individual you support schedule appointments with the dentist every 6 months.
- If possible, encourage the individual to eat less sugary foods and drinks and to consume them with meals, rather than between meals.



- Do not let individuals share toothbrushes. If necessary, label toothbrushes for different individuals in the home or shared environment.
- Dentures should be removed and cleaned every morning and night with proper cleaner.
- When dentures are out of the mouth, remind the individual to brush their gums and roof of the mouth.

Source: DDS Clinical Services

Tips on How to Help Individuals be More Comfortable With Dental Visits

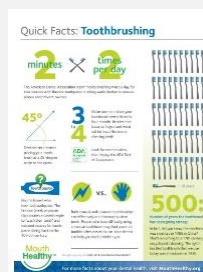
- Discuss the individual's level of comfort and understanding with the dental team before going to the appointment.
- Desensitizing visits can be helpful with familiarizing the individual with the dental office, staff, and equipment prior to any procedures or treatment.
- Use visual supports like social stories and the tell-show-do technique to help decrease dental anxiety.
 - [Social stories](#) help explain situations that individuals may find difficult.
- Approach dental visits in the least restrictive manner, offer to bring items that increase comfort to the individual (favorite object, stuffed animal, or headphones), or sit nearby during the appointment.
- Bring sunglasses for bright dental office lights.
- Make appointments during less busy appointment times to avoid feeling rushed.

Source: DDS Clinical Services

Additional Resources

- [Finding Low-Cost Dental Care](#)
- [Finding a Provider for Individuals with Medi-Cal Dental](#)
- [Medi-Cal Dental Smile California](#)
 - [Information for Caregivers](#)
 - [Videos](#)
- [Oral Health Plan for Regional Center](#)

Downloadable Infographic



You can download this infographic by the American Dental Association about helpful toothbrushing practices: [Quick Facts: Toothbrushing](#)



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