Oral health care for patients who have difficulty swallowing or have Nil By Mouth

Information for Health Professionals

Why good oral hygiene is so important?
- It makes the mouth feel comfortable
- The plaque bacteria can cause chest infections
- Bad oral hygiene causes halitosis
- Brushing stimulates the mouth and reduce hypersensitivity
- Dental erosion is more common due to reduced saliva and reflux

Assessment and oral care plan

Are there any abnormalities?
- colour of mouth
- texture of soft tissue
- lesions
- bleeding

An oral care plan, taking into account their general health, medical condition and prognosis, should be made for each patient including:
- dental history
- oral care skills
- medication

Please see the ‘Mouth Care’ leaflet for more information.

When the mouth is sensitive
- massage around the mouth and cheeks to improve muscle tone, mobility and saliva flow and desensitise the area
- introduce a small soft toothbrush gradually to reduce hypersensitivity ready for proper brushing
- activities such as blowing instruments, mouth toys and using a straw can help mouth function

To avoid choking when cleaning teeth
- use suction if available, before and after cleaning
- position the patient upright if possible and tilt the head forwards. If unable to remain upright, aim to lay them on their side with their head on a pillow and a towel covering the pillow. Seriously ill patients should be turned on their side and/or their head propped with pillows
- use a smear/pea sized amount of low-foaming toothpaste, for example OraNurse, Sensodyne Proenamel, Biotene and NO water
- an aspirating toothbrush which is attached to suction may be needed
- DO NOT use Pink Sponges. They are ineffective at removing plaque and are a choking hazard

**Checklist for good oral health**
- Brush teeth twice a day with a medium textured/small headed toothbrush
- Children under 3 should use toothpaste containing 1,000ppm fluoride
- Adults and children over 3 should use a toothpaste containing no less than 1,350ppm fluoride
- Spit, or gently wipe the mouth after brushing, to keep the fluoride in the mouth to strengthen enamel of teeth. You do not need to use water when cleaning the teeth. Just wipe excess away with a tissue/towel
- If on supplements containing sugars seek advice from a dentist on minimising damage to the teeth

For patients who have difficulty or pain in swallowing due to strokes or dysphagia, will almost certainly have poor oral hygiene. Unremoved food and liquid may enter the lungs and this may cause harmful bacteria to grow. A serious infection can result (Aspiration Pneumonia). It is paramount that the oral health of these patients is addressed throughout their stay in hospital by the care team, and information given to the carers on leaving hospital.

**Xerostomia**

**Causes**
- Prescription drugs - Hypertension, Depression, Nausea, Allergies, Parkinson’s disease, Asthma, Epilepsy, Inflammatory conditions, Infertility
- Acute illness - Dehydration, Mumps
- Chronic diseases - Diabetes, Rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson’s disease
- Oxygen requiring conditions - Emphysema, Lung cancer, Severe asthma
- Radio therapy treatment
- Age
- Sjogren syndrome
- Mouth breathing
Consequences

- Risk of root caries
- Gingivitis
- Oral thrush
- Glossitis (Inflammation of tongue)
- Ulceration (Radiotherapy)
- Difficulty speaking

Oral diseases and conditions

- Gingivitis
- Periodontitis
- Mouth ulcer
- Cold sore
- Acute Herpetic Gingivostomatitis
- Oral thrush
- Stomatitis
- Angular cheilitis
- Oral cancer

Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy (PEG) - Patients often accumulate large quantities of calculus. It is important to remove this especially along gum margin to prevent gingivitis and halitosis with twice daily effective brushing. Calculus covering biting surface is less of a problem. Patients often have gastro-oesophageal reflux=Risk of dental erosion.

High-energy food supplements contain high levels of sugar and sucrose - a form of sugar. If they are used on a regular basis, it is important that the teeth are kept very clean to minimise the risk of decay. It is important to get advice on prevention from the dental team.

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If you would like to contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) please telephone 01278 432022 or email pals@sompar.nhs.uk