



Enhancing Dental Care for People with Dementia

Learn ways to make good oral hygiene easier than ever before

People with Alzheimer's disease (AD) and related dementias are very likely to have problems maintaining good oral hygiene. Brushing teeth takes many steps: remembering the need to brush; locating the toothbrush and toothpaste; applying toothpaste to the toothbrush; brushing the teeth; and rinsing the mouth with water. For the person with dementia, this becomes a more difficult task to complete resulting in poor oral hygiene and, ultimately, other more severe health problems.



Long-term planning for maintaining dental health needs starts with emphasizing prevention through regular dental check-ups. Take care of dental problems as soon as they are discovered so that they don't develop into more difficult problems to treat. Consider increasing visits to the dentist to four times a year for regular cleanings. By preventing tooth decay and gum problems, you can avoid pain and infection later.

Additionally, if your loved one cannot tolerate a lengthy oral procedure such as a teeth cleaning, breaking up the procedure into two shorter sessions might be helpful, especially if resistive behaviors such as clenching the mouth and grabbing or pushing, are present. If your loved one is living in residential memory care, talk with the medical director about their oral health procedures for residents. Find out if a dental professional is contracted to make regularly scheduled visits to the residential facility. Make sure your loved one always has a tooth brush and toothpaste available.

5 Preventive Tips to Consider:

1) Consider the relationship between diet and good dental health.

Recognizing that the taste for sweets is the longest remaining taste sense, foods containing sugar or that are high in acid (such as orange or grapefruit juices) should be limited. Some in-between meal snacks can also present problems to maintaining oral hygiene, especially if those snacks are cookies.

2) Encourage your loved one to eat fruits instead of sugary snacks. When sugary snacks are given, make them a part of regular meals and encourage either brushing teeth or using a mouth rinse immediately after eating.

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Creating a Successful Dental Visit

Dental visits may become more challenging as the dementia worsens. Here are some tips that can help alleviate some challenging behaviors before/ during a dental visit.

- Schedule the appointment during the person's best time of the day (that is usually mid-morning)
- Do not announce the visit in advance. Rather, invite your person to come with you on an outing.
- Notify the dentist's office when you plan to arrive so that your person is not sitting in the waiting area for an extended period of time. A quiet waiting area is best.
- Talk with your dementia specialist about an anti-anxiety medicine to have on hand. If medication is needed, make sure that it is given in sufficient time prior to the appointment to minimize behaviors.
- If necessary, bring someone else with you to drive the car while you sit next to your person.
- Ask the dentist if you can stay with your person to provide comfort, such as holding his/her hands.
- Following the visit, diffuse any tension by stopping for a treat to celebrate your successful dental visit.



3) **Be aware that your dentist may have limited education or experience in working with people with dementia.** Dementia patients are typically not capable of accurately providing necessary information for appropriate treatment decisions. The dentist must, therefore, rely on the accompanying caregiver.



4) **Think ahead and discuss with the dentist the options for dental emergencies.** Where would you be able to take your person in case of a night time or weekend dental emergency? A broken or abscessed tooth can be very painful and, without immediate attention, can cause other medical problems such as dehydration. A hospital emergency room is not equipped to treat these types of dental emergencies.

5) **Discuss treatment options in advance for after hours or weekend dental emergencies so that your loved one does not suffer prolonged pain.** Similarly, look for signs that your loved one is in pain such as wincing when eating or drinking, or not eating or drinking at all. Holding their hand to their face, rocking back and forth, or a scrunched forehead are also indicators of discomfort or pain.

When looking out for your loved one's health, remember to also keep an eye on their teeth and gums. Oral health directly impacts the rest of the body. Remember, the mouth is a window into one's overall health.

Tip on Brain Health: Keep Smiling!

Smiling helps you stay positive. Try this test: Smile. Now try to think of something negative without losing the smile. It's hard. When we smile our body is sending the rest of us a message that "Life is Good!" Stay away from depression, stress and worry by smiling.

November Beacon Bits

November is National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month and National Family Caregivers Month

According to the *Alzheimer's Association 2010 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures report*, there are more than 5 million Americans living with Alzheimer's and as many as 10 million family caregivers. The Banner Alzheimer's Institute is a nonprofit organization providing prevention and care supported by generous contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations. For more information about how you can make a gift of support to the Banner Alzheimer's Institute, visit BannerHealth.org/AlzFoundation or call (602) 747-GIVE. A donation envelope is included this month's BAI Beacon for your convenience.

Give your loved one a personalized CD of songs for the holidays! **Musical Memories** is a program that is designed to help you identify and download favorite songs for individuals with dementia. You will work with a special volunteer, Joan Keffeler, who will help you create this CD in under two hours. The cost of the program is \$15, which will purchase an iTunes card and allow you to download about 12 songs. Make your appointment today so you can beat the holiday rush!

MAPS (Memory Assistance and Planning Session) will offer final full-day caregiver education program in 2010. Join us on Friday, December 8th from 9 am to 3 pm at Banner Estrella Hospital, Conference Rooms 2 & 3. This program will equip the caregiver with valuable strategies to enhance daily living for the person with dementia while incorporating self-care strategies. A \$25 fee covers the cost of continental breakfast, lunch, instruction and materials.

GPS for Memory will continue in 2011 on the second Friday of each month from 11 am to Noon. Join us on December 10th for "Nurturing Your Whole Person" as Helle Brand, PA shares tips on how to finish 2010 and renew 2011 with some practical self-care methods!

To register for any of the programs, call Veronica Ellis, 602-839-6850 or email veronica.ellis@bannerhealth.com

Ask The Expert



Helle Brand, PA

Dear Helle:

My wife has always had the most beautiful smile and she always cared for her teeth beautifully. However, as her Alzheimer's disease has worsened, she seems more confused when I remind her to brush her teeth and when I try to help her she gets really angry with me. I don't want to see her teeth decay and I want to make sure that she maintains her beautiful smile. What suggestions do you have?

Signed:

Not-Smiling Husband

Dear Soon to Smile:

This is a common situation for many caregivers as dementia progresses. I recommend initiating the activity by getting her attention and saying, "Let's go brush your teeth," and gently leading her to the bathroom sink. If she is resistive, wait a few minutes, provide some type of pleasant distraction and then try again. Make sure her toothpaste and toothbrush are visible on the counter. You might ask her to "show me how you brush your teeth." Many caregivers find that brushing their own teeth often kicks in the "motor memory" for the person with dementia to begin initiating the activity independently. Stay with her throughout the activity to be sure that she brushes all of her teeth.

You may also find that buying children's flavored toothpaste makes it more palatable and using a toothbrush with soft bristles will prevent injury to the gums. If your wife has difficulty with brushing you can also try using a battery-operated "spin brush," which will do the work of brush strokes. If your wife uses mouthwash, consider using Biotene, which is a non-drying mouth rinse.

Your loving encouragement and adaptations will likely help your wife to maintain her dental health and beautiful smile!

Sincerely,
Helle Brand
Physician Assistant

Have a question?
To submit your question
for future consideration
email us at bainfo@bannerhealth.com

Our Mission

To end Alzheimer's disease without losing a generation, to set a new standard of care for patients and their families, and to forge a model of collaboration in biomedical research.