

“Handy hints and tips for encouraging a dementia sufferer to brush their teeth’

1. Always Brush at the Same Sink

If it is easier for you both to stand around the kitchen sink and brush, there is nothing wrong with taking the routine outside of the bathroom. However, you are advised to maintain this method. Try to avoid switching from sink to sink. If you brush in the kitchen, stay in the kitchen. You must keep as much of the routine consistent as possible.

2. Use a Mirror to Stimulate Recognition

Even in the later stages of dementia, patients will have days when they recognise their carer, their environment, and themselves. Do not shy away from the visual triggers and clues which could help to stimulate these memories. There will be times when confusion and frustration lead to anger, but the responses are valuable. When brushing, stand or sit the person in front of a mirror so that they can see their own face. This will help them find their mouth, keep the toothbrush in place, and associate their movements with their body.

3. Smile as Often as Possible

This might feel unnatural, but it will go a long way towards keeping a dementia sufferer feeling comfortable and relaxed. As the brain functions deteriorate, it becomes harder for patients to distinguish between the different facial expressions. Even a neutral expression can be mistaken for a frown and the person may respond with stress or anger. To avoid this, keep your facial expressions relaxed, speak gently, and smile to put them at ease.

4. Allow the Patient to Brush Independently

This piece of advice will be difficult to follow at first. If you are not a medical caregiver, it will take lots of practice, patience, and experience to find the right balance between direct assistance and essential independence. It is vital, even for late stage dementia sufferers, to be given the opportunity to function as normally as they can. While this will clearly be difficult most of the

time, forcing a person to accept help if they are keen to try something for themselves will only cause more stress. Before stepping in and brushing their teeth for them, try giving basic instructions or [performing a simple demonstration](#) to jog the memory.

5. Use Tepid Water for Rinsing

As the gums age, they recede and the teeth are left vulnerable to extreme changes in temperature. To prevent nasty shocks, use tepid water to rinse teeth after brushing. If the water is too cold and causes pain, the dementia sufferer may resistant or become upset. Also, make sure that the toothbrush you use is not too firm. It is best to steer clear of electric brushes as the noise can be confusing.

6. Try a Little Distraction

If you have tried all of the above techniques and are still struggling to convince a patient to clean their teeth, a little distraction may be in order. Once again, the key is to keep things relaxed and casual. You do not have to make them entirely forget that they are brushing their teeth, but introduce something which makes the process fun or more interesting. Over the years, studies have demonstrated the remarkable impact of music on dementia. Even in the late stages of the illness, many sufferers remember their favourite tunes and light up when they are played. This technique is definitely worth a try if you keep encountering resistance when it comes time to brush.

7. Forget the Baby Talk

One thing which medical professionals are keen to remind caregivers of is the fact that their charges still recognise themselves as adults. The brain may be functioning erratically, but it is rare for a person to revert back to childhood. In fact, dementia is so frightening precisely because sufferers are adults trapped in a disordered world. They know that they are adults and it is hard for them to be talked to in simple, babyish tones.

To avoid conflict and aggression, try not to confuse basic instructions with baby talk. When brushing, be direct and use easy to understand language, but do not revert to a 'sing song' tone.

8. Keep an Eye on Oral Health

You might find it tricky to keep tabs on the oral health of a dementia sufferer. Even if you watch them closely whilst they brush their teeth, it may be hard to spot problems quickly. The best way to approach this is with vigilance. If you can recognise the early signs of a dental problem, you are more likely to catch and treat it before it becomes a serious issue. For instance, keep a weather eye out for unusual habits like lopsided eating. If the person is consistently eating with only one side of their mouth, they may be in pain or struggling with sensitivity. If they start to pick, play, or pull at the insides of their mouth, there could be an ache.

9. Investigate Problems Gently

If you do suspect that there might be a dental problem, approach the situation gently. Do not try to open their mouth or manipulate their face without permission, as this will only cause anger and aggression. Once you do have permission, perform a visual inspection. Ask the dementia sufferer to describe the type of pain and its location. In the event that you cannot persuade them to let you look, go ahead and book a dental appoint anyway. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

10. Later Stage Brushing and Care

If you continue to handle primary care duties by yourself, even once the dementia has progressed to its later stages, you may eventually need to take full responsibility for brushing. The best way to do this is to sit the person in a comfortable chair and wait until they are relaxed and feeling safe. Then, stand behind them (make it clear that you are going to do this first) and cradle their head with one hand. Brush their teeth with the other hand. It is okay to do this with a dry brush if it prevents mess and fuss.

<https://www.carefreedental.com/resources/13-dental-health/166-dementia-and-oral-health-how-to-help-sufferers-care-for-their-teeth>