

A Caregiver's Guide to Practical Oral Care for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs



Developed By:

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Right Care. Right Time. Right Place.
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Introduction

As a caregiver, you know taking care of a child with special health care needs takes patience and skill.

You also know how hard it is to help your child with dental care. Dental care isn't always easy, but you can make it work for you and your child. This booklet will show you how to help someone brush, floss, and have a healthy mouth.

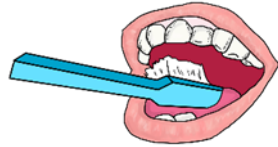
Everyone needs dental care every day. Brushing and flossing are important for good health. A healthy mouth helps people eat well, avoid pain and tooth loss, and feel good about themselves.



Three Steps to a Healthy Mouth

Like everyone else, people with special health care needs can have a healthy mouth if these three steps are followed:

1. Brush at least twice a day.



2. Floss at least once a day.



3. Visit a dentist regularly.



Also remember to choose tooth friendly foods like:

- Fruits



- Vegetables



- Whole grains



- Protein like beans, tofu, meat and eggs



- Drink plenty of water



Limit These Foods:

- Sugary or acidic drinks, like juices, soda and sports drinks.



- Sticky snacks.



If your child drinks from a bottle, talk to your doctor about the best age for your child to stop feeding from a bottle.



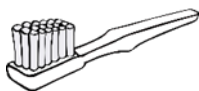
Getting Ready

Location

The bathroom isn't the only place to brush teeth. The kitchen or dining room may be more comfortable. Instead of standing next to a bathroom sink, have your child sit at a table. Choose a location with good lighting. (Page 12 lists ideas on how to sit or stand when you help someone brush and floss.)

Place these items on a table where they are easy to reach:

- Toothbrush



- Toothpaste



- Floss



- A bowl



- A glass of water



Preparation

At first, dental care can be scary to some people. Try the “tell-show-do” approach to ease fears.

Tell your child about each step before you do it. For example, explain how you will help your child brush and what it feels like.

Show how you’re going to do each step on yourself first. Let your child hold and feel the toothbrush and floss if they’re able.

Do the steps with your child the same way that you’ve shown them.



General Tips

- Give your child time to adjust to dental care. Be patient as your child learns to trust you working in and around their mouth.
- Give positive feedback often.
- Have a routine for dental care. Brush at the same time and place every day. Many people with special health care needs accept dental care when it's familiar.
- Be creative. Some caregivers allow their child to hold a favorite toy or special item for comfort. Others make dental care a game or play a person's favorite music. If none of these ideas help, ask your child's dentist or dental hygienist for advice.



Brushing Tips

- First, wash your hands. Sit or stand where you can see all of the surfaces of the teeth.
- Be sure to use a toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use a pea-size amount of toothpaste with fluoride.
- Toothpaste comes in a variety of flavors so find one your child likes.
- Brush all sides of the teeth. Gently brush back and forth in short strokes, or circular motion.
- Focus on one tooth at a time.
- Angle toothbrush down into gums for lower teeth and up into gums for upper teeth
- Gently brush the tongue after you brush the teeth.
- Help the person rinse with plain water or wipe the mouth with your finger wrapped in gauze.

Get a new toothbrush with soft bristles every 3 months, or when the bristles are worn.

Adapting the Toothbrush for Special Needs

Make the toothbrush easier to hold.

The same kind of Velcro® strap used to hold food utensils is helpful for some people.



Others attach the brush to the hand with an adaptive handle or a wide rubber band. Make sure the band isn't too tight.



Make the toothbrush handle bigger. You can also cut a small slit in the side of a tennis ball and slide it onto the handle of the toothbrush.



You can buy a toothbrush with a large handle and slide a bicycle grip onto the handle. Foam tubing, available from health care catalogs, is also helpful.



A power toothbrush might make brushing easier. Take the time to help your child get used to one.



Guide the toothbrush.

Help brush by placing your hand very gently over your child's hand and guide the toothbrush. If that doesn't work, you may need to brush the teeth yourself.



Floss Every Day

Flossing cleans the sides of each tooth and below the gumline where a toothbrush can't reach. Many people with special health care needs require help to floss. Flossing is a tough job that takes a lot of practice. Waxed, unwaxed, and flavored flosses are all available. Choose the one your child likes best or is easiest to use.

- Use a string of floss 18 inches long. Wrap that piece around the first or middle finger on each hand.
- Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand.



- Start with the lower front teeth, then floss the upper front teeth. Next, work your way around to all the other teeth.
- Work the floss gently between the teeth until it reaches the gumline. Curve the floss in a “c” shape around each tooth and slip it under the gum.

- Slide the floss up and down. Do this for both sides of every tooth, one side at a time.
- Adjust the floss a little as you move from tooth to tooth, so the floss is clean for each one.
- Try a floss holder. If you have trouble flossing, try using a floss holder instead of holding the floss with your fingers.



- Rinse with water after each meal.
- The dentist may prescribe a special rinse for your child. Fluoride rinses can help prevent cavities. Chlorhexidine rinses fight germs that cause gum disease. Follow the dentist's instructions and tell your child not to swallow any of the rinse. Ask the dentist for creative ways to use rinses for a child with trouble swallowing.

Positioning Your Body: Where to Sit or Stand

Experts in providing dental care for individuals with special health care needs recommend the following positions for safe dental care:

On the floor. Place your child on the floor, sitting up. Sit right behind them, on a chair or stool. Tip the child's head back into your lap. If your child will not sit still, gently place your legs over your child's arms to keep them still. You can also lay your child on the floor, with their head on a pillow or on your lap. Kneel or sit behind your child's head. If you need to, use your arm to keep them still.

In a beanbag chair. If your child can't sit up, place your child in a beanbag chair. Use the same position described above for sitting on the floor.

On a bed or sofa. Lay your child on a bed or sofa, with their head in your lap. Support your child's head and shoulders with your arm. If your child will not stay still, another person can gently hold their hands and feet.

In a chair or wheelchair. Stand behind the chair or wheelchair. Use your arm to brace the child's head against the chair or wheelchair or against your body. You can use a pillow to make the child more comfortable. Or, sit behind the chair or wheelchair and tilt it back into your lap. Remember to lock the wheels of the wheelchair.

Warning: Some children make extra saliva during toothbrushing.

To prevent the child from choking on saliva, make sure the child's head is not tilted far back. Whichever toothbrushing position you choose, hold the child's head upright or to the side. That will help stop saliva from running down the child's throat. This warning is especially important for children who have a poor swallowing reflex or poor tongue control.



Visit a Dentist Regularly

Your child should have regular dental appointments. Professional cleanings are just as important as brushing and flossing every day. Regular examinations can identify problems before they cause unnecessary pain.

Before your child's appointment, an introductory visit to the dentist might help your child become more comfortable. This is when your child can meet the dental team, sit in the dental chair, and receive instructions on how to brush and floss. This visit can go a long way towards making dental appointments easier.

Prepare for Every Dental Visit: Your Role

Remember, you are the most important source of information for your child's dentist. Below are some tips to be prepared for every appointment:

- **Know your child's dental history.** Keep a record of what happens at each visit. Talk to the dentist about what occurred at the last appointment. Remind the dental team of what worked and what didn't.
- **Bring a complete medical history.** The dentist needs each child's medical history before treatment can begin. Bring a list of all medications your child is taking and all known allergies.
- **Bring all insurance, billing, and legal information.**

Remember...

Brushing and flossing every day and seeing the dentist regularly can make a big difference in the quality of life for your child. If you have questions or need more information, talk to a dentist.



Alameda County Resources for Dental Services

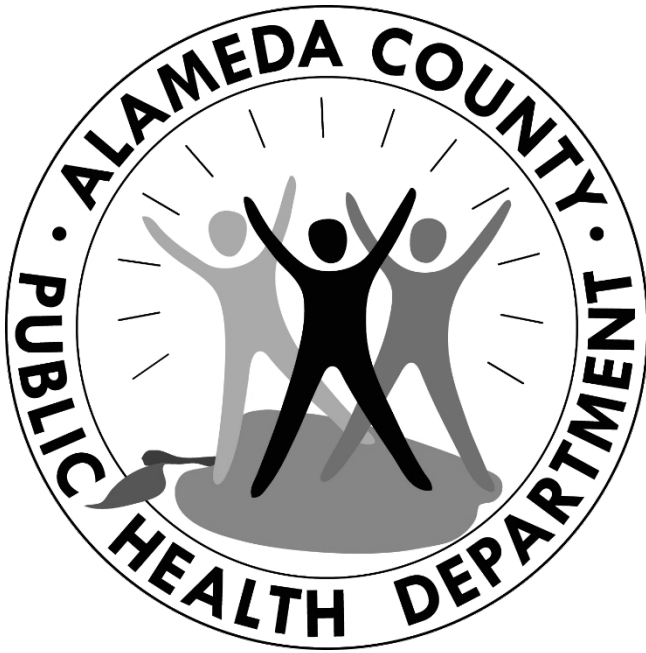
Office of Dental Health Dental Referrals: 510-208-5910

Medi-Cal Dental Referrals*

Call Center: 800-322-6384

Website: <https://www.denti-cal.ca.gov/find-a-dentist/home>

*Case Management Services and Translation Services available



Alameda County California Children's Services

MISSION

California Children's Services of Alameda County promotes optimal health outcomes for children and youth with special health care needs through compassionate, comprehensive, and specialized collaboration with families and health care providers.

Appreciation to National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research for inspiration for this booklet. NIDCR is not responsible for any of the content of this booklet.