

Oral Care Cards

Introduction

When someone has dementia, normal daily activities become difficult: Something as simple as brushing your teeth can become a challenge. And for those caring for people with dementia, helping them brush their teeth can be challenging too, because dementia increases threat perception and decreases ability to understand things in context.

But it's important to care for the teeth and gums of those with dementia, especially as more people are able to retain their natural teeth because of good preventive dental care (regular checkups) and fluoridated water. Good oral health is essential to overall health – it helps with nutrition, better management of other chronic conditions like diabetes, and helps maintain a natural smile.

To protect oral health, it's best to:

- Brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste (before bed is the most important)
- Floss once a day
- Rinse or swab teeth once a day with a non-alcohol, fluoride rinse
- Get regular dental checkups

The techniques described in the guide – Managing Oral Hygiene Using Threat Reduction (MOUTH) – were developed by Dr. Rita Jablonski and her colleagues. The techniques are important not only for oral care, but for the overall health and care of a person with dementia.

For more information about oral health, visit www.SeniorsOralHealth.org.

**Approach
slowly at eye
level**



Caregiver note:

Approaching at eye level helps the caregiver appear without surprising the older adult.

Standing over a person may bring on a threat response and care-resistant behaviors.

Provide a quiet environment



Caregiver note:

It's important to simplify the environment as much as possible. The least amount of noise and activity is best. Turn off televisions and radios.

A lot of noise and people may cause the person to interpret the situation as threatening.

Build trust with conversation



Caregiver note:

Friendly actions by the caregiver help to make the situation feel safe.

Use gentle touch sparingly



Caregiver note:

Gentle touch, like a pat on the hand, can bring reassurance and reduce anxiety.

Use touch sparingly; it is best to gently touch the parts of the body farthest away from the point of care, such as the hands. If touch calms the elder, one may touch the forearm or shoulder as an act of reassurance.

Smile when interacting



Caregiver note:

The caregiver should approach the elder with a friendly, smiling face and speak in a low-pitched voice using short sentences and simple, one-step requests.

Relaxed and smiling caregivers are less likely to cause care-resistant behaviors.

Talk to the person like an adult



Caregiver note:

Talk to the person like an adult; don't use "baby talk," high-pitched tones, sing-song cadences, or short sentences.

These communication styles can trigger care-resistant behaviors because it feels like a put down and heightens the perception of threat.

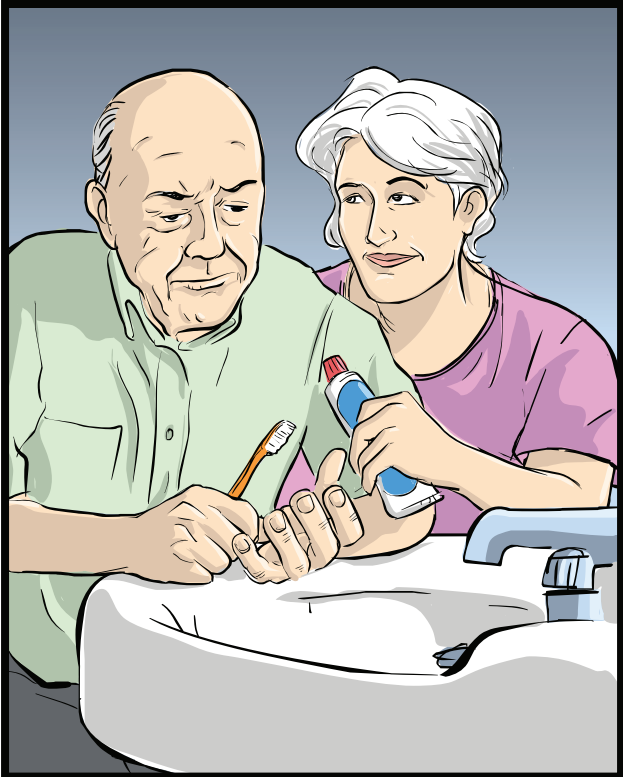
Switching gears



Caregiver note:

Singing or talking, or having a soft blanket or towel to hold, helps switch gears from a task that may be seen as threatening to something more pleasurable.

Priming



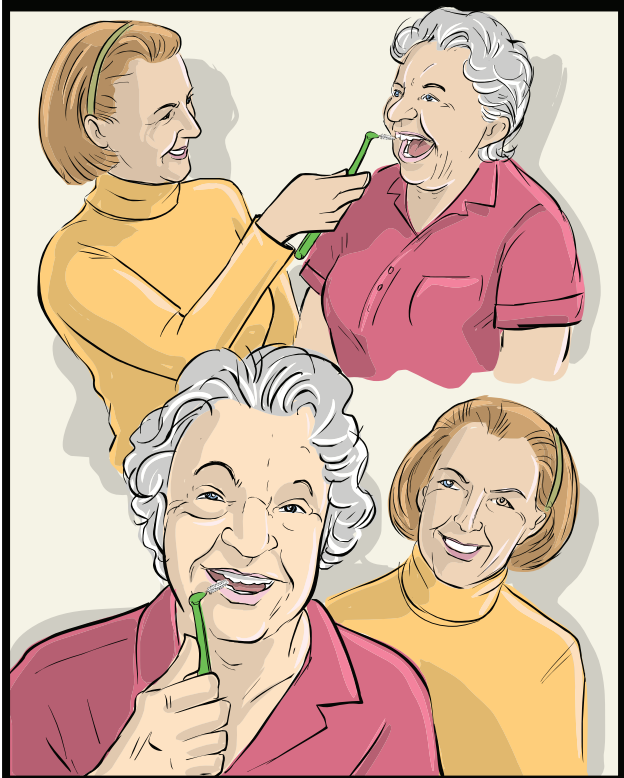
Caregiver note:

Priming targets early memories.

Using objects from the environment may help the person to start or complete oral care.

Place the person in front of a sink and place a toothbrush in their hand. Self-care is unlikely to be perceived as threatening.

Chaining

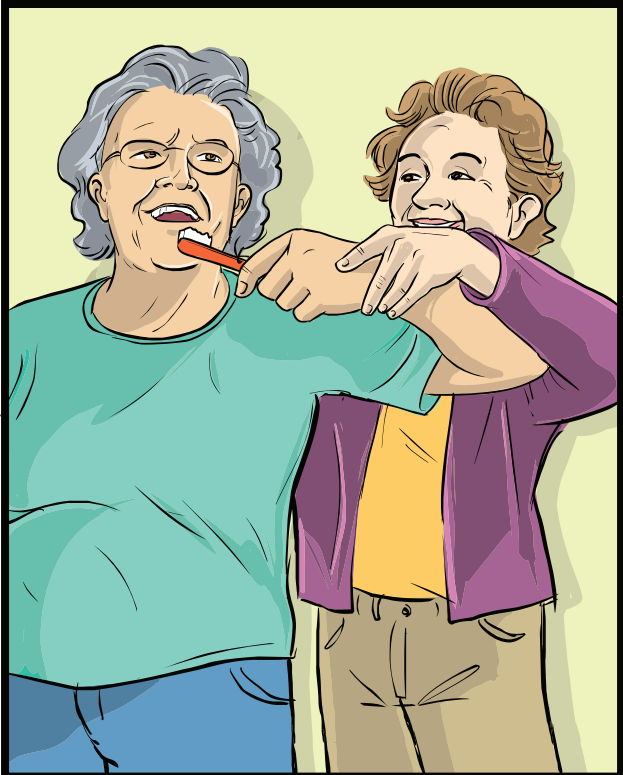


Caregiver note:

Have the caregiver start a specific oral care activity with the expectation that the person with dementia will complete the task.

Chaining is used with priming to encourage as much independent care as possible, because self-care is unlikely to be perceived as threatening.

Hand-over-hand



Caregiver note:

Place the caregiver's hand over the hand of the person with dementia and guide the hand in oral care. Often used with chaining.

Hand-over-hand reduces the perception of threat by the caregiver. This is found to be especially helpful in the removal of dentures.

Cueing



Caregiver note:

Use polite, one-step commands.

People with dementia have difficulty processing multi-step directions. Cueing prevents verbal overload, which can lead to threat perception.

Gestures



Caregiver note:

When understanding verbal commands become too difficult, gestures and pantomime are valuable communication techniques that can prevent caregiver frustration and threat perception.

Mirror-mirror



Caregiver note:

Have the person with dementia stand in front of a mirror and the caregiver stand behind him or her to provide oral care.

Mirror-mirror is believed to be successful because it removes the caregiver from between the person and his or her image in the mirror.

Rescuing



Caregiver note:

Try replacing one caregiver with another caregiver during unsuccessful oral care activities where care-resistant behaviors are escalating.

Threat may be due to the perception of a particular caregiver. When a second caregiver replaces the first caregiver, the second one is perceived as the “rescuer” who saves the person with dementia. This results in more willingness to accept oral care by the “safe” second caregiver.

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