

## Oral Health

### WHY IS ORAL HEALTH IMPORTANT?

Good oral health is an important component of general health and wellbeing and contributes to quality of life. In addition to placing an individual at risk of suffering the pain and distress of toothache, inadequate oral care can affect a person's appearance and their ability to eat and speak. There is also increasing evidence of links between oral health and other serious health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and dementia.

Improved oral and dental health has resulted in more people retaining their natural teeth into older age and while this is a positive step, it can create challenges in caring for an ageing population with complex dental needs. Older people who still have some or all of their own teeth have invested in their oral health and have a right for this to be maintained even if they lose the ability to look after their own teeth.

Increasing age can bring a number of additional risks for oral health, including:

Dietary factors:

- increasing desire for sweet / sugary foods,
- requirement for a softer diet,
- requirement for nutritional supplements which are often high in sugars

Medications:

- may contain sugars,
- side effects which can affect oral health, eg. dry mouth, oral ulceration

Dysphagia:

- tendency to "pocket" or hold food in the mouth,
- use of thickeners
- non oral feeding\*

Reduced manual dexterity:

- conditions such as arthritis / neurological problems
- may reduce an individual's ability to physically care for their own teeth and mouth

Reducing cognitive function:

- may forget to brush teeth
- reduced motivation for oral health
- potential distress when help with oral care is provided

Inability to access dental care:

- difficulty attending dental clinic
- problems may develop to a more advanced stage before detected

\*maintaining a high standard of oral care is equally important in patients who are not orally fed and can help reduce the risk of pneumonia

The increasing prevalence of dementia presents particular challenges in maintaining oral health as patients become increasingly dependent. As cognitive function declines, individuals often become distressed when the necessary assistance with oral care is provided. Loss of communication skills may also make it difficult for a patient to alert carers to the fact that they are experiencing a dental problem or pain, and this should always be borne in mind as a potential reason for distress.

Where palliative or end of life care is being delivered, enhanced mouthcare is an essential component of ensuring the patient remains as comfortable as possible.