



Dementia Friendly Dental Care

Dental professionals can play a key care and support role for people with dementia and their care partners. They can provide ongoing oral health services, promote timely detection and diagnosis, educate about dementia, and connect people with community resources that promote quality of life. Dental care settings with dementia champions and helpful practices can advance a community's effort to be supportive of everyone touched by the disease.



Promoting Early Detection and Diagnosis

A definitive diagnosis can bring understanding and relief to both the patient and their care partners. Benefits can include:

- Maximizing a person's time to make decisions and plan for the future.
- Allowing early access to services and support.
- Reducing health-related and other risks, including future financial implications.
- Improving clinical outcomes and management, including dental health.

Implementing Dementia Care Best Practices

- Obtain training on dementia care best practices to provide person-centered oral health services that maximize function and quality of life across dementia stages and settings of care.
- Recognize signs and symptoms of cognitive problems and potential causes, both reversible and irreversible.
- Effectively and compassionately share concerns about cognitive health to encourage appropriate medical follow-up.
- Recognize and appreciate care partner support issues such as frustration, stress or excessive burden.
- Refer the patient and care partners to appropriate community resources for counseling, education and planning when needed.

Using a Person-Centered Approach to Dental Care

To create a welcoming and supportive practice environment:

- Reduce background noise, activity and other distractions.
- Provide adequate, uniform lighting and avoid excessively bright or shadowy areas.
- Provide clear, easy-to-read signage.
- Use non-reflective, non-slip, even flooring with simple patterns.
- Offer quiet and comfortable seating areas away from doors, elevators and potential hazards, such as hot coffee pots, area rugs, and others.

To improve communication:

- Use good verbal strategies by allowing adequate time, speaking slowly and clearly, using a positive tone and simpler sentences and choices.
- Use good nonverbal communication via relaxed posture, direct eye contact, smiling, slower movements and gentle touch.
- Pay attention to patient body language and facial expressions for signs of stress, anxiety, agitation or discomfort.

To facilitate appropriate decision-making and informed consent:

- Discuss care goals, values and preferences with the patient and responsible parties.
- Involve the patient in decisions to the maximum extent possible while remaining sensitive to fluctuating capacity and complexity of decisions.
- Recognize decisional incapacity and involve proxies, loved ones and other members of the healthcare team as needed.

To provide appropriate treatment plans:

- Consider disease stage and trajectory when developing dental treatment plans.
- Emphasize early intervention, long-lasting and easily maintained restorations, and definitive treatment versus monitoring potential problems.
- Preserve natural teeth and avoid removable prostheses whenever possible.
- When removable prostheses must be made, emphasize easily maintained, repairable, adaptable designs with clear identification.
- Emphasize aggressive preventive care including improved daily hygiene, dietary counseling, topical fluorides, care partner education and more frequent dental recall.

To manage behavioral symptoms:

- Recognize and differentiate behavioral symptoms of less consequence from those that must be managed for safe and effective treatment.
- Communicate, validate, redirect and re-approach when behavioral symptoms arise.
- Employ effective non-pharmacologic strategies to manage anxiety, agitation, disruptive movements, resistance and combativeness when needed.
- Consider pharmacologic intervention only when non-pharmacologic interventions fail.
- Avoid or minimize anticholinergics, hypnotics (benzodiazepines) and other psychoactive medications.
- When pharmacologic intervention is necessary, employ short-acting agents at the lowest dose possible in consultation with primary medical providers.

Using a Coordinated, Person-Centered Approach (cont.)

To enhance safety and effectiveness of dental procedures:

- Document dementia type, stage, decision-making capacity, responsible parties, behavioral symptoms and their management strategies in dental records.
- Schedule shorter appointments when the patient is well-rested.
- Utilize familiar faces, comfort objects, weighted blankets, x-ray aprons or other measures as needed for reassurance.
- Take breaks if signs of anxiety or agitation appear.
- Minimize use of block and long-acting local anesthetics, and warn about potential lip and tongue chewing.
- Simplify post-operative care as much as possible for patients and care partners (e.g., extra attention to hemostasis, removal of gauze packs, etc.)
- Provide clear, written post-operative instructions for patients and/or care partners.

To support care partners in maintaining patients' oral health:

- Develop daily oral hygiene plans that are effective, yet as simple as possible.
- Judiciously incorporate economical, easily used assistive hygiene devices based upon patient tolerance and behavior.
- Prescribe prescription fluorides and antimicrobial mouth rinses when needed to help combat caries and periodontal disease.

To promote personal safety and independence:

- Guard against wandering, and have a plan in place for staff action should wandering occur.
- Report an at-risk driver to the Minnesota Driver and Vehicle Services. Submit a request for driver examination.
- Report suspected abuse, neglect or financial exploitation.

To provide patient and care partner services and support:

- Refer to Alzheimer's Association Minnesota North Dakota and Senior LinkAge Line[®].
- Encourage care partners to tap into services that will help maintain their physical and emotional health. Suggest one-on-one consultation by a caregiver consultant, support groups, in-home care and/or adult day services when a patient or care partner needs support.
- Encourage patients and care partners to connect with others and engage in health and wellness activities.
- Remind care partners to take care of their own health and well-being, including regular medical and dental checkups.
- Encourage care partners to talk with others about the diagnosis so people can understand and provide support; encourage them to ask for help from family and friends; recognize and respond to signs of burnout.

Resources in Your Community

Alzheimer's Association Minnesota North Dakota

The 24/7 Helpline serves people with memory loss, care partners, health care professionals, the general public, diverse populations and concerned friends and family. The 24/7 Helpline offers referrals to local community programs and services, dementia-related education, caregiver consultation, crisis assistance and emotional support. Call 1-800-272-3900 or visit www.alz.org/mnnd.

Senior LinkAge Line®

This resource provides information, assistance and connections to various services and resources in your community. Call 1-800-333-2433 or visit www.MinnesotaHelp.info®.



Take Action

Using the ACT on Alzheimer's provider practice tools, video tutorials, dementia education and dementia in-person training will help your dental care setting become dementia competent and a leader in providing quality dementia care for all.

www.actonalz.org/provider-resources

Support for this guide was provided by:



The Minnesota Northstar GWEP is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Award No. U1QHP33076; the University of Minnesota Office of Academic Clinical Affairs; and the Otto Bremer Trust.



Delta Dental of Minnesota Foundation



ACT on Alzheimer's: Minnesotans working together to transform Alzheimer's through social change and community engagement.