

Oral Health

for Children with Special Needs

Developmental disabilities can affect the skills necessary to complete daily tasks, including maintaining good oral health.



Children with developmental disabilities are at a higher risk for oral

health problems, including cavities, enamel irregularities, gum and oral infections, delayed tooth eruptions, and bite problems.

Providing these children with appropriate dental care takes planning, time, and the willingness and ability to manage the child's physical, mental and behavioral problems.

Where to begin? By helping your child brush every day. If your child is able to brush on his or her own, that's great, but many need encouragement or creative ways to help them develop and maintain healthy dental habits.

For practical reasons, you might need to make the child's toothbrush easier to hold.



Children who use a strap to hold utensils may find it helpful to use a similar device to hold a toothbrush. Or use a rubber band to hold the brush in place (by looping the band over the toothbrush and sliding the hand between the band and the brush).

You can make a toothbrush handle bigger by cutting a slit in a tennis ball and sliding the ball onto the toothbrush. It will make it easier, and maybe more fun, to grasp.

Extra Care for Special Needs

Brushing twice a day and flossing daily are important habits to maintain because of the youths'

susceptibility to:

- Tooth decay
- Periodontal (gum) disease
- Imperfect positioning of the teeth, which can make chewing and speaking difficult, and increase the risk of gum disease and dental caries
- Teeth grinding and clenching
- Oral malformations, which may cause enamel defects in the teeth
- Delayed tooth eruption

Your child might need extra help with flossing. Wrap a piece of floss around the middle finger of each hand. Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand, and gently slide the floss between the teeth until it touches the gum line.

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Finally, curve the floss around each tooth and slip it under the gum, sliding the floss up and down each side of the tooth. Adjust the floss as you switch teeth so the floss is clean for each tooth.

You also can help manage your child's oral health through fluoride toothpaste and healthy snacks. Children who enjoy nutritious foods and who get enough fluoride as their teeth form will get fewer cavities than those who don't. Your dentist will know what's right for your child.

Dental Checkups Crucial

It's important that your child feels comfortable at the dentist's office. Sometimes it can help to request a visit with no treatment planned so that a child can meet the dentist and dental staff, get comfortable in a dental chair, and simply get a feel for things ahead of treatment.

Because one's overall and oral health are so tightly connected,

Did you know?

Some children with special needs have challenges that can impact their oral health.



- **Children with physical disabilities**, such as cerebral palsy, may not have the motor skills needed to use a toothbrush safely or to sit still in a dental chair.
- **Children with intellectual disabilities** may not know how to brush their teeth, protect their teeth from injury, or cooperate with dental office staff while getting care.
- **Children with communication disorders**, such as delayed speech and language development, may not be able to tell their parents that their mouth hurts or they have a toothache.
- **Children who take medicines with added sugars** or that cause dry mouth are at high risk for tooth decay.

Source: *Practical Oral Health Care for People with Developmental Disabilities* (nidcr.nih.gov)

it's not an overstatement to say oral care is a special need – for everyone. 🦷

FYI: More information can be found at the TRICARE Dental Program's (TDP) Dental Health Center (uccitdp.com); the Academy of General Dentistry (agd.org); the American Dental Association (ada.org); and the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (nidcr.nih.gov/).

Fact sheets in United Concordia's oral health series:



• Fluoride & Your Oral Health



• Oral Health & Diabetes



• Oral Health: Infant to Teen



• Oral Health & Your Overall Wellness

• Oral Health for Kids with Special Needs

• Preventive Oral Care for Everyone



• Your Oral Health & Heart Disease

• Your Oral Health & Lupus

• Your Oral Health & Oral Cancer



• Your Oral Health & Organ Transplants

• Your Oral Health & Rheumatoid Arthritis

• Your Oral Health & Pregnancy



Download fact sheets from the TRICARE Dental Program (TDP) Dental Health Center: uccitdp.com