



A GUIDE FOR CARERS

When someone resists mouth care

Tips and coping strategies to make mouth care calmer and kinder

People living in care homes are at higher risk of mouth problems because many depend on others for their care, and many are living with dementia. As dementia progresses, people often become more resistant to mouth care. Toothbrushing becomes harder, and carers can feel less confident about offering it.

This leaflet brings together practical tips from **Mouth Care Without a Battle** (University of North Carolina), **NHS Scotland** and **Teepa Snow**. There is no single solution. What works for one person may not work for another, and techniques may need to change as a person's health changes.



Resistance is often communication.

The person may be confused, frightened, or in pain. Stay calm, slow down and try again.



SECTION 01

Before you start

POSITION YOURSELF

- Sit down to brush if you can, so you can see into the mouth better.
- Approach from the front so the person can see you. Greet them and talk to them.
- Then move to the side to give care. This is better for your back and gives you a clearer view.

COMMUNICATE

- Say what you are going to do before you do it, and why.
- Talk **to** the person, never **about** them.
- Be patient, reassuring and unhurried.
- Stay calm and quiet yourself.
- Give positive feedback and encouragement.

Encourage independence

Do all you can to encourage the person to do as much as possible for themselves. People often resist less when they are encouraged to carry out their own mouth care, because it gives them a sense of control. Try these techniques and strategies:

Bridging

“Follow my leader.” Show the person the toothbrush and describe it. Pretend to brush your own teeth, then give them a spare toothbrush. They may copy you and brush their own teeth.

Chaining

Gently bring the person’s hand to their mouth while describing what you are doing. Let them carry on if they can.

Hand over hand

If chaining doesn’t work, place your hand over the person’s hand and gently brush their teeth together.

Distraction

Try singing, or give the person something familiar to hold or do while you brush their teeth.

Rescuing

Sometimes a different carer can take over. A new face, approach or manner may help the person cooperate.

Timing

Morning may not be the best time. Mouth care after medication and breakfast, or at a calmer time of day, may work better.

Break the task down

Brush one side of the mouth in the morning and the other side in the evening. Record which areas have been brushed so other staff know.

Come back later

If the person is agitated, stop and try again another time. With a smile, tell them you’ll come back later.



SECTION 02

Hand on shoulder technique

Teepa Snow's Hand on Shoulder Distraction Technique has received positive feedback from carers. It helps the person feel they are brushing their own teeth while you guide them.

- 1 Stand on the person's dominant side.** If they are right-handed, stand on their right. Fine motor skills and automatic habits are strongest on this side, and the person will look at you and pay more attention.
- 2 Put the toothbrush in their dominant hand** so they feel they are brushing their own teeth.
- 3 Place your hand over theirs** and guide their hand to their mouth. You are guiding the toothbrush.
- 4 Rest your other hand on the shoulder closest to you** and apply gentle downward pressure. This helps the brain pay less attention to the mouth.

SECTION 03

Common challenges

If someone won't open their mouth

They may not understand you, or may not want their teeth brushed.

- Stroke the side of the cheek to encourage them to open.
- Say what you are going to do, then touch the lips or teeth gently with the brush to prompt opening.
- Place the back of the toothbrush against the lips and gently twist it so it opens the lips and touches the front teeth.
- Clean the outer surfaces of the front teeth first, then the outer surfaces of the back teeth.

If someone bites the toothbrush

- Keep a second toothbrush handy. If they bite down on one, use the other to carry on brushing. This gives you access to the inside surfaces of the teeth.
- Gently rub the cheek or jaw to relax the jaw so they let go of the toothbrush.
- Never pull the toothbrush out.

If someone sucks the toothbrush

Sucking is an instinctive reflex.

- Explain what you are doing, be gentle and reassure them you will be quick.
- Gently rub the cheek to relax the jaw muscle.
- Clean the outer surfaces of the front teeth first, then the back teeth.
- Ask the person to say "ah" so you can clean the biting and inside surfaces.

If someone can't spit

- Make sure the person is sitting upright.
- Use a smear of toothpaste, preferably non-foaming, or dampen the toothbrush with mouthwash.
- Don't add extra fluid to the mouth.
- Hold a cup under the mouth. If they link the cup with drinking, sit them near a sink instead.
- Remove excess fluid with damp gauze.



SECTION 04

Distressed or aggressive behaviour

Distress often means the person doesn't understand what is happening, or something hurts. Stay safe and never force mouth care.

IF SOMEONE SHOWS PHYSICAL AGGRESSION

- Stop and come back later, at a time of day when the person is calmer.
- Try a carer the person knows well and feels relaxed with.
- Explain what you are going to do and why.
- Be patient, take your time and be reassuring.
- Stay calm and quiet yourself.
- Look in the mouth for soreness, infection or broken teeth.

IF SOMEONE GRABS YOUR HAND

Grabbing the hand is most common in the middle stage of dementia.

- Stop what you are doing.
- Explain what you are doing. They may not understand, or they may be in pain.
- They may want to brush their own teeth. Give them the toothbrush, put your hand over theirs and guide them.

Could the mouth be sore?

A dry or sore mouth is uncomfortable and can make someone resist mouth care. Look in the mouth for signs of soreness, infection or broken teeth. Be gentle, use a soft toothbrush and run it under warm water first. If you notice bleeding, ulcers or sores, be gentle, keep an eye on them and report them.



If someone refuses mouth care, never force it. Stop, stay calm and try again later, using the tips in this leaflet.



SECTION 05

If someone continually refuses mouth care

Missing mouth care can quickly lead to pain, infection and other health problems. Continual refusal needs a planned response from the whole team.

5

THE TRIGGER POINT

5 refusals in a row

If someone refuses mouth care on 5 consecutive attempts, take the steps below.

What the care home should do

- 1 Record every refusal** on the person's daily mouth care chart, including what was tried and how they responded.
- 2 Complete a Mouth Care Refusal Form**, available to download from our website.
- 3 Escalate to a senior nurse, the manager or the person's medical team.**
- 4 Check for pain or mouth problems.** Look for soreness, ulcers, infection, broken teeth or ill-fitting dentures, and arrange a dental assessment if needed.
- 5 Review the approach.** Try a different carer, a different time of day and the techniques in this leaflet, and record what works.
- 6 Talk to the person and those close to them.** Ask family and friends about past routines, preferences and anything that might help.
- 7 Consider mental capacity.** If there are concerns about the person's capacity to make decisions about their mouth care, follow your Mental Capacity Act procedures.
- 8 Seek specialist advice** from dementia liaison or community mental health teams, the person's dentist or another healthcare professional, or your local NHS dental helpline.
- 9 Update the oral care plan** with the agreed strategies, share it with every member of staff, and review it regularly.

Make it part of your oral care policy

- Include your refusal procedure in the care home's oral care policy.
- Make sure everyone knows what to do, including new starters, agency and night staff.
- Cover it in induction, training and team meetings.

Download our refusal form

Download and complete our Mouth Care Refusal Form and supporting guidance to help your team record refusals and agree next steps.

Download at www.kohc.co.uk →

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