



A GUIDE FOR CARERS AND PEOPLE WITH PARKINSON'S

# Mouth care and Parkinson's

Keeping the mouth healthy and comfortable as symptoms change

Parkinson's is a progressive neurological condition. It develops when nerve cells in the brain that produce dopamine are lost. The main symptoms are tremor, stiffness (rigidity) and slowness of movement, along with balance problems. Many people also have non-motor symptoms, such as changes in memory and thinking, mood, swallowing and sense of taste.

As symptoms progress, brushing becomes harder and medicines can affect the mouth. This guide explains what to look out for and practical ways to help.



SECTION 01

# How Parkinson's affects the mouth

Keeping the mouth healthy can become more difficult as Parkinson's progresses. Both the condition and the medicines used to treat it can cause mouth problems.

## Brushing becomes harder

Tremor, stiffness and involuntary movements (dyskinesia) can make it hard to hold and control a toothbrush.

## Dry mouth

Some Parkinson's medicines cause a dry mouth, which increases the risk of tooth decay, gum disease and oral thrush.

## Drooling

Swallowing less often lets saliva build up and spill over, which can make the lips sore and cracked.

## Swallowing difficulties

Weaker muscles in the face and jaw can affect chewing and swallowing.

## Loose dentures

Weaker jaw, face and tongue muscles, together with a dry mouth, can make dentures hard to control.

## Grinding, pain and taste

Parkinson's is linked with teeth grinding, which can crack and wear the teeth, as well as facial pain and changes in taste.



**Dry mouth and drooling can happen at the same time. Some medicines reduce saliva while others increase it, and drooling is usually caused by swallowing less, not by making more saliva.**



SECTION 02

## Dry mouth and drooling

### DRY MOUTH

- A lack of saliva increases the risk of tooth decay, gum disease and mouth infections, and can make dentures harder to keep in place.

### WHAT CAN HELP

- Take regular sips of water or sugar-free drinks. Tea and coffee should be taken without sugar.
- Try saliva-stimulating lozenges, or dry mouth gels, sprays and rinses, such as Biotène, Oralieve or ACT Dry Mouth.
- Keep the lips moist with a water-based lip balm or gel.
- Ask the GP or pharmacist to review medicines that may be causing a dry mouth.

### DROOLING

- Drooling is usually linked to swallowing less often. Saliva builds up in the mouth and overflows, which can make the lips sore or cracked.

### WHAT CAN HELP

- Improve posture: a stooped, head-down position makes drooling worse.
- Use a reminder, such as a beeper or timer, as a prompt to swallow.
- Gently dab (don't wipe) saliva away and protect the lips and chin with a barrier cream or lip balm.
- Try the lip exercises below.

## Lip exercises

These simple exercises help lip closure and control. Repeat each one a few times a day.

**1 Close your lips** as tightly as you can and hold for a count of 4. Relax, and repeat 5 times.

**2 Smack your lips together**, as if puffing on a pipe.

**3 Stretch your lips into a wide smile** and hold for a count of 4, then relax.



SECTION 03

## Swallowing and dentures

### SWALLOWING: WHAT CAN HELP

- Sit upright with the head up when eating, drinking and during mouth care.
- Take smaller bites and eat more slowly.
- Choose foods and drinks that are easier and safer to swallow.
- Jaw and mouth exercises recommended by a speech and language therapist can strengthen the muscles and improve quality of life and oral health.
- If you notice coughing or choking when eating, drinking or during mouth care, ask for a speech and language therapy referral.

### LOOSE DENTURES

- Weaker jaw, face and tongue muscles, and a dry mouth, can make dentures difficult to control.
- Loose dentures can rub and cause ulcers, making eating and speaking even harder.
- Ask a dentist to check the fit if dentures are loose or causing sore spots.
- Clean dentures daily and store them dry overnight in a clean, named pot.

### Dental visits

- Keep up regular dental check-ups, and tell the dentist about Parkinson's and all medicines taken.
- Book appointments for a time of day when medicines are working well and movement is easiest.
- Ask the dentist about teeth grinding, worn or cracked teeth, facial pain and extra fluoride protection for a dry mouth.

### Why it matters

Individual mouth care advice, together with chewing and lip exercises, has been shown to improve oral health for people with Parkinson's. A healthy, comfortable mouth also makes eating, speaking and taking medicines easier.



SECTION 04

# Toothbrushing tips

Encourage the person to brush for themselves for as long as they can, and give as much help as they need.

- 1 **Use a small, soft-headed toothbrush** with a pea-sized amount of fluoride, non-foaming toothpaste. Brush last thing at night and at one other time during the day.
- 2 **Consider a powered toothbrush.** The handle is larger and easier to grip. Choose a small head with soft or medium bristles.
- 3 **Try a three-sided toothbrush**, which cleans three surfaces of the teeth at once.
- 4 **Brush 2–3 teeth at a time**, making sure the bristles sweep along the gum line.
- 5 **Use the stronger hand**, but it helps to learn to brush with both hands, as Parkinson's can become more disabling on one side as it progresses.
- 6 **Sit down to brush**, with arms supported if needed, to help with balance and control.
- 7 **Brush when medicines are working well** and movement is easiest.
- 8 **Use disclosing tablets or solution** after brushing. The dye shows where plaque has been missed.
- 9 **Spit, don't rinse**, so the fluoride stays on the teeth for longer.

## Sources

- All Wales Special Interest Group in Special Oral Health Care. Mouth care for people with Parkinson's disease.
- Parkinson's UK. Eating, swallowing and saliva control.
- Parkinson's UK. Mouth and dental issues in Parkinson's (2018).
- Martimbianco ALC et al. Evidence-based recommendations for the oral health of patients with Parkinson's disease. Neurology and Therapy, 2021.

## Ask a question. We're here to help.

Our team of dental care professionals can advise on mouth care for people with Parkinson's.

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