

CARE-RESISTANT BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS MOUTH CARE IN PEOPLE WITH A NEURO-DISABILITY



Key points

- Some people with a neuro-disability may exhibit care-resistant behaviour when being supported with mouth care.
- It is important to try and find ways to support people with mouth care. Otherwise, oral health will deteriorate, which can lead to pain, problems eating and deterioration of general health.
- Showing staff and family how to support people with good mouth care is an important part of their overall care.



What is care-resistant behaviour in relation to mouth care?

Some people with a neuro-disability may lack understanding of the need for mouth care, see it as a threat to them and therefore be resistant to the process. Resistant behaviour may manifest as pushing the hand or toothbrush away, head movements, clenching the mouth shut or verbally making noises.

Why are people who display care-resistant behaviour at a greater risk of developing oral problems?

- It can be very challenging for staff and carers to assess the mouth and provide regular effective mouth care.
- Carers may be understandably more anxious about providing mouth care.
- Dental examinations may be less frequent and there may be a need for the person to have sedation or a general anaesthetic for dental care including for dental assessments.



Signs and symptoms of oral health problems

Many people with a neuro-disability will be not be able to articulate that they have pain from their mouths or problems with their teeth, so carers and families need to be vigilant for signs and symptoms of oral problems including:

- Facial swelling on one side of the mouth, a visible loose tooth, marked redness or swelling of the gums, obvious black appearance of a tooth.
- Not wanting to eat as they do normally.
- Becoming resistant to mouth care when previously accepting support.
- Self-harmful behaviours, for example, biting their hands or lips.
- Changes in sleeping patterns or signs of infection such as raised temperature.
- Unpleasant odours or an increase in drooling from the mouth.



Supporting people with mouth care

There are different ways in which staff and carers can support people who are resistant to mouth care including:

- Developing a routine, providing mouth care at the same time each day. For some people there are times when they are more relaxed. For example, first thing in the morning or after lunch.
- Being kind and patient, explaining what you are doing, taking your time and showing the person the toothbrush before starting to clean their mouth.
- Use a toothbrush and toothpaste that is familiar to the person.
- Asking a carer or a family member who is more familiar to the person to help with mouth care.
- Anxiety may result in resistance to mouth care. It may be useful for two people to be involved in the exam. One to look in the mouth while the second person reassures and distracts.
- Carrying out mouth care in short bursts.
- Using two toothbrushes, one for the person to bite on and the other to brush the teeth.
- Allowing the person to hold another toothbrush in their hand as it may prompt memory of tooth brushing.
- Put a smear of toothpaste on the person lips. This may help them to understand that their teeth are going to be brushed.
- Doing the best you can, even brushing the outer surface of the teeth has a benefit for the person.
- Sometimes there is a need for gentle clinical holding such as hand holding but this should be discussed as part of a care plan and carried out by trained staff.
- If it is suspected that someone has a problem with their teeth or mouth an urgent referral should be made to their dentist.