

ORAL HEALTH & AGING



INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS



FLOSSING

Oral Health and Older Adults

If you regularly help someone with oral health care, this fact sheet is for you. It offers practical suggestions about how to provide guidance or direct care, as well as tips that may make the job easier. Oral health is important for people of all ages. Oral health is linked to overall health and can impact physical, psychological, financial, and social wellbeing. A healthy mouth helps people enjoy their food, chew better, eat well, and avoid pain and tooth loss. With good oral hygiene and regular visits to the dentist, older adults can maintain their oral health into their later years.

Flossing

Flossing removes dental plaque between teeth where a toothbrush can't reach. If not removed, dental plaque can build up and cause tooth decay and gum disease.

If the person you care for can floss, make sure he or she:

- Follows the step-by-step guide (see next page)
- Uses tools that might make flossing easier
- Flosses regularly

What type of floss?

- Waxed, unwaxed, flavored, or plain floss all do the same thing. Use the one the person you care for likes best.

What if it's hard to floss?

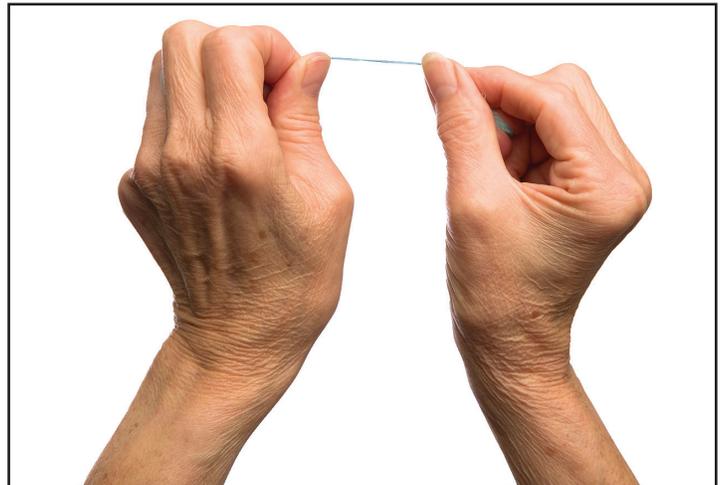
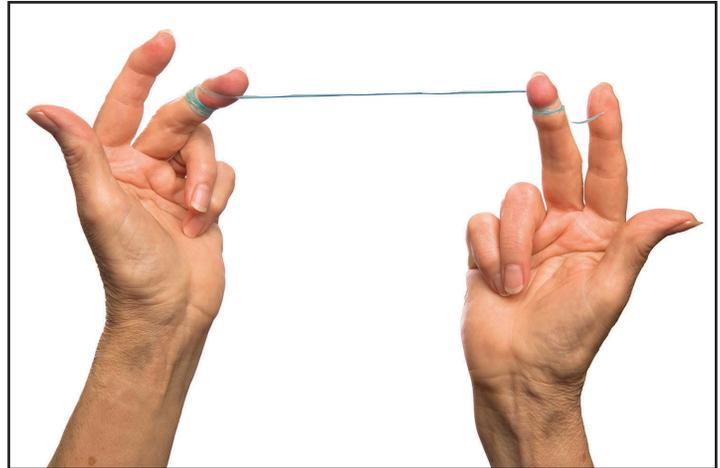
- If it's hard to floss, there are flossing tools that can help (see inside page).



Flossing Step-by-Step

If the person you care for can floss, here are the steps he or she should follow:

- Use a string of floss about 1 foot long. Wrap that piece around the middle finger of each hand.
- Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand.
- Ease the floss gently between the teeth until it reaches the gumline. Don't "snap" or force the floss into place – as it could harm the gums.
- Curve the floss like the letter "C" around each tooth, keeping in contact with the side of the tooth. Slide the floss up and down under the gum.
- Do this for both sides of every tooth, one side at a time. Adjust the floss a little as you move from tooth to tooth so the floss is clean for each one.
- Be sure to floss all teeth, including the backs of the last teeth on each side.
- Use flossing tools if needed.



If the person you care for cannot floss, you will need to floss his or her teeth. Here are some suggestions that might be helpful:

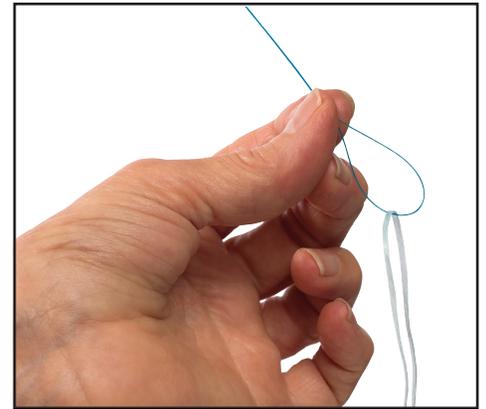
- Find a comfortable position for both of you. One of the easiest ways to floss someone else's teeth is to have him or her lie down on a bed while you kneel or sit alongside.
- Make sure you have floss, flossing tools, and disposable gloves.
- Follow the step-by-step flossing instructions (previous page) and use the flossing tools if needed.

Flossing Tools

- Floss holders are small, plastic tools with a handle that holds a piece of floss securely in place.
- Floss threaders are plastic loops that help you floss hard-to-reach or tight spaces, such as between crowded teeth, dental crowns or caps, or under dental bridges.
- Oral irrigators (also called dental water jets or water flossers) spray water between teeth to help clean them.
- Interdental brushes are tiny brushes shaped like a cylinder or pine tree. They are specially designed to clean between teeth. They're also called proxy brushes.



Floss holder



Floss threader



Oral irrigator



Interdental brush

Visiting the Dentist

The person you care for should have regular dental checkups. Professional cleanings are just as important as brushing and flossing at home. Regular exams can identify problems early, before they cause unnecessary pain or infection. Remember, preventive visits are painless and can help you avoid more costly treatment. Before each appointment, make sure to have a list of current medications, known allergies, and any insurance or billing information.

At these visits, the dentist or dental hygienist will review the person's medical history and may suggest an oral hygiene routine that may make it easier for the person you care for. The dentist may also prescribe a special toothpaste or mouthwash to help prevent tooth decay, or mouthwash to fight germs that cause gum disease. Follow the instructions provided by the dentist or hygienist.

For information on finding free or low-cost dental care, visit:

- <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/finding-dental-care>
- <https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov>

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