Aspiration Pneumonia and Oral Health Fact Sheet

FOR PROVIDERS

OCTOBER 2017

The Challenge…
Aspiration pneumonia is a prominent cause of mortality among individuals age 60 and older in both independent homes and institutional facilities, accounting for nearly 15,000 deaths annually.¹

The risk of aspiration pneumonia is increased when periodontal disease, dental caries, and poor oral hygiene are compounded by swallowing disease, feeding problems, and poor functional status.²

What you need to know…
Studies show that the oral cavity may be a reservoir for respiratory pathogens that can lead to aspiration pneumonia in high-risk elderly adults living in nursing homes. Poor oral hygiene and dysphagia are among the most significant risk factors for developing aspiration pneumonia.²

Due to an older adult’s weakened immune system, when oral bacteria in the saliva enters the bronchi and lungs, it is more likely to result in a pneumonia. Signs and symptoms include difficult or shallow breathing, fever, weight loss, frequent throat clearing, and a productive cough with foul smelling and/or tasting sputum.

An increased number of teeth with active periodontal infections increases the risk of complications from aspiration pneumonia in older adults.

Ways You Can Help…

• Refer patients with dysphagia to a qualified speech pathologist who can teach them swallowing techniques (i.e. the chin-tuck strategy).

• Encourage patients to adopt a diet with food textures that are less likely to be aspirated.

• Recommend three to six month dental visit intervals for high risk patients.

• Assistance with daily flossing and brushing may be needed. When indicated, recommend adaptive oral hygiene devices to improve plaque control.³

Footnotes:
1. http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Aspiration+pneumonia,+oral+health+and+the+elderly-a0447636996
2. http://cid.oxfordjournals.org/content/40/12/1807.full.pdf+html

Resources:
https://www.perio.org/consumer/healthy-lungs

For more information, contact Office of Oral Health
Phone: 860-509-8251
Email: dph.officeoforalhealth@ct.gov