

The Oral Health Connection



Autism & Oral Health

What is Autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a "spectrum disorder" that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees.

Oral Health Problems in Autism

People with autism experience few unusual oral health conditions. Although commonly used medications and damaging oral habits such as pouching (the placement of food or medicine between the cheek and teeth for a long period of time) can cause problems, the rates of caries and periodontal disease in people with autism are comparable to those in the general population. **Communication** and **behavioral problems** pose the most significant challenges in providing oral care.

Daily Oral Health Care:

- Help brush your children's teeth every day, and at least two times a day, after the morning meal and after the last snack of the day.
- Use a small; soft toothbrush and a pea-sized drop of toothpaste on the toothbrush.
- Give lots of praise while brushing your child's teeth.
- **Do not** reward good behavior with food.
- Children taking oral medications should have their teeth cleansed after each dose of medication. Nearly 100% of children's medications contain sugar, which can increase the risk of developing cavities.
- Parents should not let their children drink fruit juice or sweetened drinks from a bottle or "Sippy" cup, since this prolongs the exposure of teeth to harmful sugar and may cause additional cavities.

Before Dental Appointment Tips:

- Make friends with the receptionist in the dental office. Tell her as much as you can about your child.
- Obtain and fill out all the medical forms before the appointment.
- Deliver the forms to the dental office; go over them together with the receptionist.
- Practice **SHOW- TELL-DO** with your child
 1. Visit the office several times before the appointment, to make it familiar.
 2. At home practice touching your child's face while they are sitting in a chair.
 3. Take a toothbrush and ask them to open their mouth. Pretend to count their teeth, while touching each tooth with a toothbrush. Do it at least one time a day.
 4. Once your child becomes comfortable with being touched, put on a pair of dental gloves and again touch their face with it.
 5. Brush or count their teeth with gloves on.
 6. Always praise, every step of the way.
 7. Some children who have autism feel more secure with a heavy blanket around them.
 8. Read or make a book about going to the dentist.
 9. Call the dental office and ask if you and your child can visit the office. Let you child sit in the dental chair. Do this several times.

Tips for Appointment Day:

- Relax.
- Tell your child where you are going.
- Tell the dentist about your child.
- Ask the dentist to talk to your child every step of the way:
Instructions should be presented in clear, short, simple sentences.
- Dentist should use: **SHOW- TELL-DO** every step of the way.
- Appointments should be short.
- Praise the positive outcomes, ignore the negative behavior.

