



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

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among individuals
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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>
3. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-2358.2012.00637.x/abstract>

Resources:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11380747>
<https://www.perio.org/consumer/healthy-lungs>

For more information, contact Office of Oral Health
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