

## Community Dental Service

**When toothbrushing is  
difficult - advice for carers of  
adults with additional needs**



## Advice when adults gag, retch or clamp

- Changing the person's body position, brushing at a different time of day or using a smaller toothbrush may help to reduce some of these problems.
- Stand behind and slightly to one side of the person whose teeth are to be brushed. This will give you better control of their lips and is less confrontational than standing directly in front of them.
- Start brushing where both you and the person whose teeth you are brushing is most comfortable. Clean as much of the mouth as they will allow. Leave time for the person to swallow, spit out or to take a breath.
- If they become uncooperative, attempt to brush the remainder of their mouth at a later time.
- If they clamp on the toothbrush, leave it as a prop and use a second toothbrush to clean all the teeth you can reach.
- Applying gentle pressure with a finger on the chin, just below the lower lip, can reduce a gag reflex in some people.

## A strong tongue or tight lips

- Massaging the lips and cheeks before brushing may relax them.
- A clean cotton handkerchief or gauze wrapped around your forefinger may be used to gently retract or hold back the tongue / lips

## Mouth sensitivity

- Massage around the mouth and cheeks to improve muscle tone, mobility and saliva flow and to desensitise the area.
- Gradually introduce a small, soft toothbrush to reduce hypersensitivity ready for proper brushing.
- People who dislike the taste of regular toothpaste may prefer an unflavoured toothpaste. Your dentist can advise which one to use.
- Some activities can help mouth function, for example, blowing instruments or using a straw. Ask your occupational therapist or speech and language therapist for advice.

## Swallowing difficulties

- Tilt the persons head forward to help prevent aspiration when toothbrushing.

- Use a non / low foaming toothpaste (the dentist can advise which one is best).
- An aspirating toothbrush which is attached to suction may be needed.

## **Grinding**

This problem is very difficult to stop and can lead to tooth wear. However, massaging the mouth and cheeks using a finger for relaxation may help.

The dentist can also give advice on the use of mouth guards.

## **For times when tooth brushing is impossible**

A chlorhexidine spray or mouthwash may be used to help reduce plaque bacteria as a short-term alternative to brushing.

Wrap some gauze soaked in chlorhexidine mouthwash around a gloved finger and gently wipe the mouth and tongue.

For impartial and confidential advice or information on the services provided by Bridgewater or to receive this leaflet in an alternative format call our Patient Services team on 0800 587 0562.