



# Dental Health

## Considerations for the Neuromuscular Disease Community

**Dental health** is an important part of healthy living. When you live with a neuromuscular disease, your ability to maintain your dental health might be impacted by weakening muscles in the face, jaw, or upper body.

There are many factors to consider regarding your dental health, including risks, complications, dental appointment frequency, and specialized dental tools. This guide is meant to be used in partnership with your dentist. Here, we highlight considerations for daily hygiene and office visits, and learn more about tools to help keep your mouth healthy.

### General considerations

With many neuromuscular diseases, motor skills are lost over time, which can lead to difficulty managing dental health. It is important to tell your dental provider about the progression of symptoms that can affect your ability to brush and floss regularly. Some individuals may need dental cleanings more than the standard two to three times per year, based on their ability to maintain oral hygiene at home.

If transferring to or sitting in the dental exam chair is difficult or uncomfortable, talk to your dentist about alternative seating options. While not widely available, some dentists may have wheelchair-accessible exam chairs. Some dentists may be willing to conduct an exam while you are seated in your wheelchair.

If you have swallowing or breathing difficulties, you can request that your dentist minimize water use, use an oral evacuation device to prevent choking, and not tilt your chair back too far. Talk it through with your dentist to make sure you feel safe and well-supported.

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If you are planning to receive anesthesia for a dental procedure, speak with your dentist or another medical provider about any potential complications related to your medications.

### Tips for a healthy mouth

The following tips may be helpful. Each person's needs are unique, so be sure to talk with your dentist about what is right for you or your loved one.

- The best form of dentistry is prevention. Dentists recommend brushing with fluoride toothpaste two to three times per day and cleaning between the teeth with floss at least once per day.
- Electric toothbrushes and floss holders are great for targeting hard-to-reach areas.
- A water flosser (such as Waterpik®) can help remove food particles from tight areas.

## Tips for a healthy mouth (continued)

- Be open and honest with your dentist about any dental complications, brushing and flossing habits, and medications.
- If you have trouble holding a toothbrush, wrap your toothbrush handle in foam or another soft material to create a wider, more stable grip.
- If you experience dry mouth, ask your dentist about a formulated or prescription mouthwash. \*Chewing sugarless gum also can stimulate your mouth to produce saliva.

*\*Consult with your medical providers before beginning a new medication regimen to ensure there are no contraindications with your current medications.*



## Dental Tools to Use at Home

### Dental Wipes



Specially formulated wipes can be used between brushing to remove debris from the teeth and palate. These should not be used in place of brushing unless specifically advised by your dentist.

### Electric toothbrush



A powered toothbrush with a moving head and/or bristles. It can aid with brushing, especially if you have difficulty making brushing motions.

### Floss and assisted flossing devices



Floss is typically a thin, waxy string used to clean between the teeth. If you have trouble with hand dexterity, flossing devices such as floss threaders and holders can make it easier to grip the floss.

### Fluoride toothpaste



Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that is added to toothpaste recommended by the American Dental Association (ADA). It helps prevent tooth decay by making tooth enamel more resistant to acids in foods and drinks.

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## Mouthwash



Also known as mouth rinse, this liquid product can be used at home in conjunction with flossing and brushing to maintain oral hygiene. Mouthwash can be purchased over the counter or prescribed for conditions such as bad breath, dry mouth, tooth decay, and more. Mouthwash is not recommended for children under age 6 unless otherwise advised by a medical professional.

## Suction machine



Also known as an oral evacuation device, this machine helps remove excess saliva. If you have excess saliva or trouble swallowing, your neurologist can refer you to a durable medical equipment supplier. Your insurance may partially or fully fund the device.

## Suction toothbrush



An electric toothbrush that sucks up the water and toothpaste used during brushing. It can be helpful for individuals who have trouble spitting or swallowing, or who cannot brush their teeth independently.

## Toothpaste dispenser



A wall or tabletop device that releases toothpaste. It can be powered or manual and helps get the right amount of toothpaste out of the tube for individuals with hand weakness or tremors.

## Tongue cleaner or scraper



These devices remove bacteria, food debris, and dead cells from the tongue. They come in different shapes and sizes, and can be used along with regular brushing and flossing to keep the mouth clean.

## Water flosser



Also known as an oral irrigator, this device uses water pressure to thoroughly clean between the teeth. It serves the same purpose as floss but does not require as much hand dexterity.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **How can I find a dentist who has experience working with people with neuromuscular diseases?**

Call your local hospitals or MDA Care Center to find dental providers associated with those facilities. Most dentists who perform procedures on at-risk patients have hospital privileges.

### **How can a dentist help me with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)?**

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machines are the most effective solution for OSA, as long as they are used regularly and correctly. If you are unable to use a CPAP machine or need other options, a “sleep dentist” may be able to help by creating an oral appliance to wear at night. The dentist will most likely have qualifications such as a diplomate of the American Board of Dental Sleep Medicine, diplomate of the American Board of Craniofacial Dental Sleep Medicine, diplomate of the American Board of Sleep and Breathing, or member of the American Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine.

### **How do I manage trismus (when jaw muscles become so tight that you can't open your mouth) during dental procedures?**

Try these methods:

- Massage your jaw muscles.
- Use heat therapy for 15-20 minutes daily.
- Eat soft foods and avoid solid foods before your procedure.
- Ask your doctor about using over-the-counter pain medication or muscle relaxants.\*
- Physiotherapy treatments (e.g., neck stretching, chin tucking, masticatory muscle massaging, jaw stretching) may help reestablish normal jaw function.
- Mandibular opening devices may be considered in some cases. These can be provided by a physiotherapist or dental specialist.

*\*Consult with your medical providers before beginning a new medication regimen to ensure there are no contraindications with your current medications.*

### **Are there options to make dental visits more affordable?**

Low- or reduced-cost options for dental care include community-based clinics, Samaritan programs, church-based dental groups, and dental schools. The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) offers resources to help you find low-cost dental services through its website.

### **Can a ventilator affect dental health?**

It is always important to prioritize oral hygiene. The main concern with a ventilator is a lung infection called ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP). You can reduce your risk of VAP by keeping your mouth clean using a mouth rinse, gel, and/or toothbrush in combination with the suction of secretions.

## Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

### How do medications affect dental health?

It is important to disclose any medications you are taking before you receive dental treatment. This information is important for your dentist to consider in case you need premedication for treatments, extra care when it comes to extractions, or additional appointments if you are prone to cavities and dry mouth.

### What should I consider before getting braces?

When you get braces, your eating habits may change, as certain foods can break the brackets and wires. You must also consider the need for frequent visits to the orthodontic office for adjustments, which can lead to discomfort, and adding extra hygiene practices to your routine to ensure no cavities develop.

### What do I do if I am having difficulty flossing?

You can use aids to assist with flossing, such as floss threaders and holders, or have someone help you with flossing.

### How can I avoid aspiration (liquids or other substances entering the airways) during dental care?

If aspiration is a concern, talk with your dentist about using a gauze or foam throat pack, or an oral evacuation device.

### What if it is difficult for me to open my mouth wide enough for a dental exam?

Have your dentist use a bite block, which will keep your mouth open and allow you to rest your jaw.

### Is orthodontic intervention recommended for a person who has limited oral function or speech impediments?

Yes. Working with an orthodontist and a speech pathologist can help improve oral function. In some cases, a provider may recommend a surgical procedure.

**Watch MDA's Dental Health and Neuromuscular Disease webinar for disease-specific information, as well as more tips and frequently asked questions. Visit [MDA.org](https://www.mda.org) to find an MDA Care Center near you.**

This resource was developed with the expertise and knowledge of Ronak Parikh, DMD, from BayBreeze Dental in Wesley Chapel, Florida.