

# Mouth care in the last days of life

## Comfort assessment and management fact sheet

When a person is dying, it is important to keep their mouth clean and moist to prevent oral complications, and optimise their comfort, self-esteem and dignity. Frequency of mouthcare and products used will depend on individuals' needs.

### Keeping the person's mouth clean

- Use oral hygiene sponges or swabs soaked with normal saline 0.9% or water to clean the person's mouth, tongue and insides of the cheek at least four hourly.
- Use a soft bristled (baby) toothbrush and toothpaste to gently clean the person's teeth or dentures at least twice a day, as tolerated.
- Avoid using products that exacerbate a dry mouth (xerostomia) such as lemon-glycerine swabs, thymol or alcohol-based mouthwashes.

### Xerostomia (Dry Mouth)

Although a dry mouth can indicate dehydration, it is usually caused by mouth breathing. Other causes include:

- damage to salivary glands by radiotherapy, surgery or infection
- oxygen therapy
- oral candidiasis
- medications (for example tricyclic antidepressants, antihistamines, anticholinergics and opioids)

### How to help

- Encourage frequent sips of fluid if able to safely swallow and provide ice chips.
- Acidic fluids such as fruit juice can help to stimulate saliva production.
- If the person is unable to swallow, use oral hygiene sponges or swabs soaked with water (or favourite flavour) to moisten the mouth, tongue and insides of the cheek, taking care to squeeze excess water from mouth swab.

- Consider positioning the person on their side during mouthcares.
- Use a water mist spray bottle if tolerated to maintain moisture in the mouth.
- Provide favourite lip balm or lanolin for the lips.
- Apply water-based lubricants such as artificial saliva or oral balance moisturising gel inside the mouth, as needed.
- Thickened water is a useful alternative if medicated artificial saliva is unavailable.

### Key message

A common cause for family or carer distress when their loved one is no longer able to swallow is the perception of discomfort associated with xerostomia (dry mouth) for the dying person. Nursing staff can suggest the family assist with mouth care, if they choose.

For further support and advice, seek specialist palliative care advice from your local service or PallConsult **1300 PALLDR (1300 725 537)**.

### References

caring@home. (2024, December 3). *How to care for the mouth*. <https://www.caringathomeproject.com.au/resources/community-resources/how-to-care-for-the-mouth-step-by-step-guide>

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