

Dental Care for a Person with ALS (PALS)

ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. The progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually leads to their death. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. With voluntary muscle action progressively affected, people may lose the ability to speak, eat, move and breathe.

Dental health is important for PALS. As time goes on, tending to the mouth becomes more difficult for several reasons. Some PALS require a BiPAP, which is a machine to help breathing, at night, sometimes during the day, or even constantly. Most BiPAPs are portable devices that can be attached to the back of a wheelchair. PALS travel and go to various appointments with their BiPAPs.

As a dental care professional, you need to be aware that daily dental routines for people with ALS change and may require extra time and more physical help for them to maintain good dental health.

At home a person with ALS and caregivers must strive to keep the PALS mouth clean to maintain comfort, reduce bad breath, reduce the risk of gum disease, reduce the risk of pneumonia caused by bacteria in the mouth, maximize the ability to chew and drink, and help manage saliva issues.

Changes in the function of the mouth, swallowing muscles, breathing, and mobility could affect the ability to clear food from the mouth during eating, close the mouth to avoid drooling, hold liquid in the mouth, spit out liquid, control the gag reflex, tolerate some types of mouthwash, toothpaste, and other oral hygiene products, and sit in a traditional dentist chair during a procedure.

There are some dental products that might help make dental care easier such as dental wipes, tongue scrapers, mouth swabs, oral irrigators, portable suction devices, and suction toothbrushes.

If one of your patients has ALS, talk to the patient or caregiver to find out how the current state of the disease has impacted dental health and needs. This should be done every time the patient comes to your office. Please also note that the patient may have other health issues that need to be considered when teeth are cleaned, filled, or crowned.

If the patient wears dentures, they might need to be replaced as it is common for people with ALS to lose weight.

If your patient comes into your office in a power wheelchair, it will be necessary to either transfer the patient to your dental chair or use the power wheelchair during the procedure. For some PALS, it might be more comfortable to use their power wheelchair during the procedure. Many power wheelchairs have features to tilt, elevate, and recline.

It's important to encourage your patient and his or her caregiver to maintain good oral care at home including brushing at least twice a day, flossing, and assessing the mouth for soreness.