

# 13 Epilepsy and Dental Health Care for Children and Adults

Healthy teeth and gums and good oral hygiene are very important to ensure good health and general wellbeing.

### STEPS TO TAKE IN DENTAL CARE

#### Informing the Dentist

Whether you are a new or existing patient it is of **vital importance to inform the dentist** of your **epilepsy** and of **any medications you are taking**. Take your drugs with you if you cannot remember the name of the medications. Also take your seizure diary describing your seizure pattern, duration and any likely seizure triggers.

It is also necessary to discuss with the dentist what actions should be taken if you have a seizure in the surgery to ensure safety and appropriate care, e.g. deciding whom to notify or whether or not an ambulance is required. If you are particularly anxious about the visit, it would be helpful to have someone to accompany you.

If you should experience difficulty in finding a dentist, your local Health Board will advise you (see telephone directory for address and phone number).

#### Regular Dental Check-Ups

Your dentist will advise you how often you should attend for dental check ups. Do not wait until problems become difficult and painful to treat.

**Expectant mothers:** NHS dental care is **free** during pregnancy and for one year following the birth of the baby. This is a time when extra care of gums and teeth is recommended.

**Infants and Children:** Expectant mothers should consider breast feeding which is good for a baby's dental and general health.

It is never too early to introduce a child to dental care. Brushing with a smear of fluoridated toothpaste should start when the first tooth appears. **Baby teeth** are very important, not only for chewing, but for keeping the space needed for permanent teeth. Some of these first teeth have to last until the child reaches 11 years of age. Following a few simple rules will help your child to have healthy teeth.

**Parents** have an important role in caring for their child's teeth and training them to look after their teeth as they grow older. It is equally important to ensure that a child does not develop a fear of the dentist. If anxiety is causing a child to have seizures before a visit, parents are advised to discuss this problem with the dentist. It may be possible to prescribe a mild sedative before treatment.

## Plaque and Cleaning the Teeth

To ensure healthy teeth and gums, good oral hygiene is very important for everyone. **Plaque** is a sticky film formed from food residues e.g. from sweets and sugary drinks which coats the teeth, encouraging bacteria to cause tooth decay. Some types of bacteria in plaque cause acids to form, which attack the teeth. Other types produce substances that can harm the gums. Build up of plaque can lead to both gum swelling and gum inflammation which in turn can cause the gums to bleed and lead to gum disease.

Gum swelling and inflammation can be painful and can affect anyone, but groups at greater risk are young children in the early stage of physical development, adolescents and pregnant and menopausal women undergoing hormonal changes.

Pain felt in the gums during and following brushing can cause people to stop cleaning their teeth, which in turn will make the situation worse unless the plaque is removed.

**The removal of plaque** is of prime importance for dental health. Regular, thorough brushing and flossing after each meal is advised to prevent problems. Dental experts recommend brushing with fluoride toothpaste for 3 minutes twice a day, preferably after breakfast and before bedtime, rather than brushing less thoroughly more often.

Choose an ordinary or electric soft/medium soft toothbrush in good condition – never a hard one, and be sure to brush the gums also. If gums bleed after brushing it indicates there is a problem, however brushing should continue and dental advice should be sought.

Cleaning children's teeth should begin as soon as the primary teeth appear (anytime from 5 months onwards). Cleaning should be undertaken with a soft baby toothbrush and a small pea-sized quantity of fluoride (1000 parts fluoride per million) toothpaste. Twice daily supervised cleaning of children's teeth should be routine.

Most dental surgeries employ a **dental hygienist** who can offer invaluable help and advice on the day-to-day care of the teeth and gums.

## Diet and Dental Health

A diet with a high sugar content is a major contribution to tooth decay. Bacteria in the mouth feed off the sugar in the diet. This in turn creates acid which attacks the enamel of the teeth resulting in dental decay. A healthy and varied diet with as little sugar as possible is best.

It is important to check the labels on tins and packets in processed food as much of the sugar is 'hidden' under different names such as fructose, sucrose, molasses, dextrose, glucose, glucose syrup, maltose, corn syrup, honey or caramel. The earlier the word '**sugar**' appears in the list of ingredients on the label, the more sugar there is in the food. Sugary drinks, including fruit juices, should be avoided in between meals and should never be put in a feeding bottle. Give water or milk instead. Pacifiers/dummies should never be used with sugary liquids.

## Diet and Dental Health (con't)

Adults and particularly children should be encouraged to develop a taste for a wide range of unsweetened foods, drinks and snacks, such as unsweetened cereals, rice, bread, yoghurt, fish, meat and eggs etc. Eat fruit in preference to sweets and chocolate.

## Antiepileptic Drug (AED) Treatment

The majority of people with epilepsy are prescribed antiepileptic drugs (AEDs) to control seizures. Some AEDs may have potential adverse side effects in relation to dental health.

Ask your doctor/epilepsy specialist about:

- The most effective AEDs to control seizures with minimal side effects.
- Reducing the risk of dental problems during pregnancy to both the mother and baby. Women who are planning to become pregnant should consult with their epilepsy specialist about treatment options. Some older AEDs like phenytoin (Epanutin), primidone (Mysoline), carbamazepine (Tegretol), sodium valproate (Epilim) are associated with a slightly increased risk of cleft lip and/or palate in the new born which can affect the child's speech, eating and confidence.
- Risk assessment of seizures that involve high risks of falling which may result in possible facial/dental injury. Some AEDs may have side effects affecting the health of the teeth and gums. For example, phenytoin can cause overgrowth of gum tissue.

***If you are affected by any of the side effects of AEDs listed below, consult your GP, dentist or raise your concerns at your annual epilepsy review at your GP's surgery.***

Children with epilepsy who are prescribed AEDs in syrup form may have problems with their teeth due to the syrup content in the medication, particularly if the dose is taken at night. It may be possible to prescribe sugar-free liquid preparations.

Some drugs e.g. carbamazepine, primidone and phenobarbitone, may cause dryness of the mouth, due to changes in the composition or reduction in the production of saliva which is necessary for digestion of food. Other possible oral side effects of AEDs include glossitis—a smooth and painful tongue and oral ulceration (carbamazepine), and taste disturbances (phenytoin).

## Dental Accidents during Seizures

Some types of seizures, e.g. tonic-clonic (major convulsive), myoclonic (muscle jerks), may cause the person to fall and injure their mouth and gums. In the event of a fall, tooth fragments, crowns, fillings or even loose dentures may become dislodged or swallowed. If teeth are damaged, arrange an emergency appointment with the dentist as soon as possible. Free replacement dentures may be available under NHS regulations.

Sometimes, during a seizure, the inside of the mouth is bitten making it painful to brush the teeth. Dental advisers suggest the use of Corsodyl mouthwash (available over the counter from pharmacists) instead of brushing until any soreness or ulcers subside. Swelling can be reduced by holding a cold compress to the cheek or sucking an ice cube. Hot salt water mouthwash (half a teaspoon of salt to one tumbler of water) can help soothe and heal.

### Orthodontic treatment

Some children, whether they have epilepsy or not, may require orthodontic treatment. This is not usually undertaken until the child's upper canines (eye teeth), have come through which is around the age of 11 or 12.

### Cosmetic Dentistry

Injuries sustained as a result of seizures and the side effects of some medications may cause dental problems that can affect appearance, speech and self-confidence. It is possible to have some types of treatment to improve the appearance of the teeth. Seek advice from your dentist.

### Free Dental Treatment

Ask your dentist or benefit office if you are eligible for free dental treatment under the NHS.

Ask for leaflet D11, 'NHS Dental Treatment'.

Ask Epilepsy Connections for information.

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Supporting people with epilepsy

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