

## **Oral Health: From Dental Chair to Home Care**

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### **Oral Health = Overall Health**

"There's a dentist at Boston University, who puts it this way: Floss, or Die!"<sup>i</sup> This statement clearly emphasizes the importance of optimal oral health. The report, *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General* concluded that oral health is a critical component of overall health. Untreated dental problems do not heal themselves and can result in serious medical situations, often resulting in costly emergency room care and/or hospital stays. Poor oral health and hygiene have been linked to increased risk and mortality from cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes. Commenting on the lack of access to routine oral health care for many Americans, the Surgeon General described the situation as a "silent epidemic" of dental disease.<sup>ii</sup> However, with routine, preventative care and good oral hygiene habits, dental disease is almost entirely preventable.

The importance of maintaining proper oral health is significantly important for those with compromised health, such as individuals with developmental disabilities. In fact, individuals with disabilities often have increased risk factors for dental problems including: medications with high sugar contents, dry mouth, pocketing of food in the gums, and often poor or non-existent oral hygiene. Reports from the Special Olympics/Special Smiles program indicate that individuals with disabilities are almost twice as likely, as the general public, to have untreated carries, root remnants, missing teeth, gingivitis, and/or severe periodontal diseases.<sup>iii</sup> Research indicates that dental care is the number one unmet health care need for children with disabilities, and that children with developmental disabilities have significantly higher rates of poor oral hygiene.<sup>iv</sup>

Maintaining oral health also has positive social impacts, including increased self-esteem. Poor oral hygiene can eventually lead to poor appearance, chronic pain, and unpleasant odors, this can impact a person's self-esteem and quality of life. Furthermore, unsightly dental problems can also affect one's chances of employment.

### **Finding a Provider**

Individuals with disabilities often face many barriers when trying to access oral health care. First and foremost is a lack of dental providers. Many individuals with disabilities rely on Medical Assistance for their dental care.

For families looking for dental care, state managed Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) are **required by law** to provide oral health care services to their clients. To find a dentist with your insurance:

1. Turn over the insurance card.
2. Locate the "member services" phone number for your plan.
3. When you get them on the phone ask for "the Special Needs unit."

If the number is not on your card, here is a list of Medical Assistance MCO's Pennsylvania Special Needs Units Phone Numbers:

AmeriChoice of Pennsylvania	215.832.4571	TTY 800.654.5984
AmeriHealth Mercy Health Plan	888.991.7200	TTY 888.987.5704
Gateway Health Plan	800.392.1146	TTY 800.654.5988
Health Partners of Philadelphia, Inc.	215.991.4370	TTY 215.849.1579
Keystone Mercy Health Plan	800.521.6860	TTY 800.684.5505
Unison Health Plan/MedPLUS	877.844.8844	TTY 800.473.0989
UPMC Health Plan, Inc./UPMC For You	800.286.4242	TTY 800.361.2629

If you are in an area of the state that utilizes "Fee For Service," call the Medical Assistance Call Center at 866.542.3015 (TDD/TTY 1.877.202.3021). If you are enrolled in the "ACCESS Plus" program, call 800.432.7633.

If you are still experiencing difficulty finding a provider, you have many options to report the issue. Please email, call or write the following state and local agencies:

- The Office of Medical Assistance Programs (OMAP) [www.dpw.state.pa.us/omap](http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/omap) "contact OMAP" PO Box 2675 Harrisburg, PA 17105-2675;
- Commonwealth Information Center (State of PA) 800.932.0784 TDD/TYY 800.324.8040
- ACHIEVA is working to improve access to dental care for people with disabilities. Contact Mary Hartley by email [mhartley@achieva.info](mailto:mhartley@achieva.info) or phone 412.995.5000 x569 to report your dental story.

### **Tips, Strategies and Resources**

*How to make trips to the dentist's office less stressful.*

Parents and dentists both report that a key to successful dental appointments is preparation. This can include a pre-appointment visit to the dentist's office. The goals of the pre-visits include: discussing what to expect during the actual appointment, giving the child a tour of the dental office, and allowing them to sit in the examine chair and to see the tools that the dentist will use. Of course, this process should be done at a pace that the child can endure, and should not be stressful. It is often said that first impressions last a lifetime, and we routinely hear adults tell horror stories of childhood dental appointments gone bad. It is critical to make the first dental experience a positive and rewarding one. Some dentists have a video tours available on DVD or VHS in which parents can take home and watch with their child to let them see what to expect at the visit. Furthermore, daily oral hygiene is important not only to maintain proper oral health, but also to sensitize children to having someone work in their mouth.

*Resources for at home and community oral hygiene.*

The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) is a department of the National Institute of Health (NIH), a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services the primary Federal agency for conducting and supporting medical research. The NIDCR website ([www.nidcr.nih.gov](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov)) offers a variety of oral health care resources for individuals with disabilities and their family and caregivers. One of the more useful publications is the publication "Dental Care Everyday: A Caregivers Guide" The guide features tips on:



- Developing an oral health care routine,
- How to brush and floss the teeth of another person, and
- Body positioning tips.

Additionally the guide provides tips on adaptations to make toothbrushes easier to hold, such as cutting a small slit in the side of a tennis ball and slide it on to the handle of a toothbrush. If a child can handle the sound and vibrations, many parents find power or electric toothbrushes to be effective and efficient in cleaning their child's teeth. Lastly the guide provides tips on how to prepare for a dental visit.



The Specialized Care Company ([www.specializedcare.com](http://www.specializedcare.com)) specializes in adaptive oral health and hygiene equipment. One of their more popular products in the *Surround Toothbrush* (pictured above). This unique toothbrush has three sides, enabling a person to brush all three sides of their teeth with one stroke.

*Additional Web Resources*

The My Smile Guide ([www.mysmileguide.com](http://www.mysmileguide.com)) is a free online, interactive oral health management tool developed by Dr. Fred Ferguson, a pediatric dentist and professor at the Stony Brook School of Dental Medicine. The smile guide provides a detailed risk assessment based on an individual's age and habits, questions to ask your dentist based on your unique needs, offers tips on how to improve oral health, electronically reminds you about dental appointments, and provides a secure health folder to store important oral health information. This can be a useful tool for managing a family's oral health.

Still looking for more?! The following websites provides more information on oral health and oral hygiene:

Website	Description
<a href="http://www.nidcr.nih.gov">www.nidcr.nih.gov</a>	The mission of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) is to improve oral, dental and craniofacial health through research, research training, and the dissemination of health information.
<a href="http://www.mysmileguide.com">www.mysmileguide.com</a>	MySmileGuide will help you understand your risk for oral problems or the risks for someone in your care and suggest changes that will benefit your (their) health.
<a href="http://www.hcqu.apshealthcare.com">www.hcqu.apshealthcare.com</a>	The goal of the HCQU is to assure that individuals with mental retardation receive the highest quality health care in order to enable them to enjoy life to their fullest potential. The "other resources" tab takes you to several fact sheets on oral health care, including a list of dentists in the Allegheny County region who accept Medicaid.
<a href="http://www.mchoralhealth.org/headstart/index.html">www.mchoralhealth.org/headstart/index.html</a>	The purpose of the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center is to respond to the needs of states and communities in addressing current and emerging public oral health issues. This website features an A-Z directory on hundreds of topics and discussions lists to join, post questions, etc.
<a href="http://www.ACHIEVA.info/advancingoralhealthcare">www.ACHIEVA.info/advancingoralhealthcare</a>	ACHIEVA's new website offers tools and resources for dentists and families.
<a href="http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/ServicesPrograms/MedicalAssistance">www.dpw.state.pa.us/ServicesPrograms/MedicalAssistance</a>	State of Pennsylvania Medical Assistance. Click on "Dental Services

Oral Health is critically important to the overall health of all individuals. At home oral hygiene and regular dental appointments are the keys to attaining and maintaining a healthy mouth and teeth. Provided in this article are tips and resources to help a person with a disability (or their family) to both access dental care services and to maintain proper oral hygiene habits. For more information on any of the topics in this article, or for questions and comments, please contact Jeff Fromknecht by email at [jfromknecht@ucppittsburgh.org](mailto:jfromknecht@ucppittsburgh.org)

References:

<sup>i</sup> Steve Pearlman, DDS, Global Clinical Director, Special Olympics/Special Smiles. ACHIEVA Disability Health Forum, November 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> US Public Health Service, *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General* (September 2000), accessed online at [www.nidcr.nih.gov/aboutNIDCR/SurgeonGeneral](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov/aboutNIDCR/SurgeonGeneral)

<sup>iii</sup> ACHIEVA, *Access to Oral Health Care for Pennsylvanians with Disabilities: A Rising Public Health Issue* (March 2007), accessed online at [www.achieva.info/docs/DHPFreport.doc](http://www.achieva.info/docs/DHPFreport.doc)

<sup>iv</sup> Lewis, C., Roberston, A.S., Phelps, S. (2005). Unmet Dental Care Needs among Children with Special Health Care Needs: Implications for the Medical Home. *Pediatrics*, 116 (2). 426-431.