As we get older, our teeth get older too and we need to look after them to keep them in good condition.

Good oral health can have a huge effect on your quality of life. As well as making an important contribution to your general health, it can ensure that you:

- Eat what you choose without discomfort
- Speak and socialise confidently
- Smile with comfort

The keys to a healthy, happy mouth for remember the "three As".

**Advice, Assistance, Awareness**

Remember to:
- Seek advice on oral hygiene, denture care and diet from your carer
- Your carer is there to provide you with assistance to maintain your oral health
- Awareness of oral health information will improve quality of life
Caring for older people’s teeth

Oral hygiene

Advise people to brush their teeth at least once a day with a fluoride toothpaste to help prevent tooth decay and gum disease. Advise them to use a soft-to-medium bristle toothbrush and replace this when the bristles get out of shape.

Be aware that some older people may find it difficult to brush their own teeth and may require assistance. Be aware that some people consider toothbrushing an extremely personal task and may be embarrassed to ask for help. Remember that assisting with brushing another person’s teeth can be tricky and some people find it unpleasant, however, it is extremely important. If assistance is required, try different methods to achieve the best results whilst being sensitive to their comfort. One way is to stand behind them and tilt their head back so you can reach all around the teeth.

When advising older people to brush their teeth you should remember these simple guidelines:

■ Put the bristles at the join between teeth and gums, pointing towards the gums, and brush using short circular movements.
■ Brush all round every tooth, but don’t use too much force - give teeth and gums a gentle scrub.
■ After brushing, encourage them to spit out paste but do not rinse, as this lessens the effect of the fluoride.

Be aware that there are numerous oral hygiene aids that can be very helpful for an older person; such as electric toothbrushes to assist people with limited movement and specially designed brushes with flex-grip handles for those who have difficulty holding a standard toothbrush. Also fluoride gels and mouthwashes can be excellent supplements to brushing, helping in the prevention of dental disease.

Dentures

Like natural teeth, dentures must be looked after if they are going to last. Advise people that dentures should fit well and be comfortable; however, it is also important to be aware that people can become very attached to an old set of dentures.

Whether a person has complete or partial dentures, advise them that they need to:

■ Brush gums, tongue and palate with a soft-bristled brush.
■ See a dentist for regular check-ups.

You must be aware which of the people in your care wear dentures and ensure that these are all clearly marked. All new dentures should be fitted with a metal identification tag on manufacture; however, existing sets must be marked with a permanent marker to avoid mixing them up.

Dentures also require cleaning. Some older people may have a routine for doing this themselves, whilst others may require assistance. Either way, it is important to make sure the job is done properly.

■ Dentures should be cleaned daily with a strong but soft bristled brush to remove food deposits and plaque.
■ Use a specialised denture cleaner or simply soap and water.
■ Ideally, dentures should be left out of the mouth between four and eight hours every 24 hours but only if the wearer is content to have them removed.

Dentures can break, chip and crack; or wearers can simply grow out of them, as the shape of the mouth changes. Be aware of this and consult a dentist with any problems, or before attempting to make any reconstructions or adjustments.

Diet

Be aware that sweet, sugary food and drinks can have a detrimental impact on oral health. Some older people develop problems tasting food and sweet things can be more appealing.

There are simple actions that may help reduce the damage sugars can cause to teeth:

■ Offer non-sugar sweeteners instead of sugar in drinks.
■ Ask older people if they would prefer sugar free medication if there is a choice.
■ Chewing sugar-free gum can also help, as this increases the flow of saliva, which helps teeth to repair themselves.

Information

For help, advice or assistance with any oral health issues the following may be of use to you and your residents:

■ NHS Direct 0845 4647 can help you find a local dental practitioner.
■ Community Dental Service (via your local PCT). They can help with clients who require more time than a High Street dentist may be able to provide.
■ British Dental Health Foundation Dental Helpline on 0845 063 1188.

Always advise people in your care to visit a dentist regularly and not just when there is an emergency. The dentist will screen for oral cancer as well as helping to maintain good oral health.