

Reporting oral health changes

There are a number of common oral health conditions that can affect older people's health and wellbeing. Your role as a home care worker is very important. Whether you are assisting with personal care, such as showering and dressing or with shopping, cleaning or meal preparation you are in a great position to notice changes in the person's oral health and report these to the care coordinator.



Better oral health in home care

Encourage and support clients to maintain better oral health by:

- observing for changes in oral health
- reporting the changes to the care coordinator.

This is important because:

- early observation of change alerts the care coordinator to do an oral health assessment and to initiate timely referral to a dental professional.

Stop, check, act

A simple **Stop, Check and Act** approach to thinking is an easy way to monitor and respond to changes in a client's oral health. To be able to do this well requires a good understanding of what is needed to deliver Better Oral Health in Home Care such as how to care for natural teeth or dentures as well as the ability to identify some common oral health conditions experienced by older people.

1. Stop	2. Check	3. Act
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First of all, stop and think:

- Ask yourself if you have noticed anything about your client's oral health?
- Have there been any changes?

Check your assumptions:

- Are the changes a problem?
- What could be causing them?

Act by asking what you should do:

- Is this something I should report to the care coordinator?



When did this fridge become so full of left over food?



How long has that redness at the corner of the mouth been there?



Why is there so much food being thrown away?



Why does this saliva look so stringy?

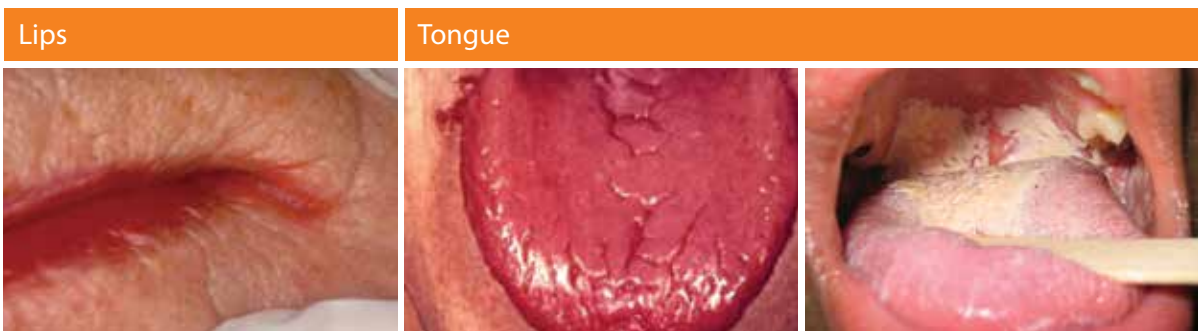


Where is the toothbrush and toothpaste?



When were these dentures last cleaned?

Common oral health conditions



Sore corners of mouth (Angular Cheilitis)

Bacterial or fungal infection which occurs at the corners of the mouth.

Check for:

- soreness and cracks at corners of the mouth.

Sore tongue (Glossitis)

This is commonly caused by a fungal infection.

It may be a sign of a general health problem.

Check for:

- a reddened, smooth area of tongue
- a tongue which is generally sore and swollen.

Thrush (Candidiasis)

This is a fungal infection of oral tissues.

Check for:

- patches of white film that leave a raw area when wiped away
- red inflamed areas on the tongue.

Gums and tissues



Gum disease (Gingivitis)

This is caused by the bacteria in dental plaque accumulating on the gum line at the base of the tooth.

Check for:

- swollen red gums that bleed easily when touched or brushed
- bad breath.

Severe gum disease (Periodontitis)

This causes gums and bone that support the teeth to breakdown.

This condition can impact seriously on general health and wellbeing.

Check for:

- receding gums
- exposed roots of teeth
- loose teeth
- tooth sensitivity
- bad breath.

Oral cancers

Oral cancer is a major cause of death. People who smoke and drink alcohol heavily are at higher risk.

Check for:

- ulcers that do not heal within 14 days
- a white or red patch or change in the texture of oral tissues
- swelling
- unexplained changes in speech
- difficulty in swallowing.

Gums and tissues (continued)



Ulcers and sore spots

These are caused by chronic inflammation, a poorly fitting denture or trauma.

Ulcers may be a sign of a general health problem.

Check for:

- sensitive areas of raw tissue caused by rubbing of the denture (particularly under or at the edges of the denture)
- broken denture
- broken teeth
- difficulty eating meals
- changed behaviour.



Sore mouth (Stomatitis)

Usually, this is caused by a fungal infection.

It is commonly found where oral tissue is covered by a denture.

It may be a sign of a general health problem.

Check for:

- red swollen mouth usually in an area which is covered by a denture.

Saliva



Dry mouth (Xerostomia)

This can be a very uncomfortable condition caused by medications, radiation and chemotherapy or by medical conditions such as Sjögren's syndrome.

Check for:

- difficulty with eating and/or speaking
- dry oral tissues
- small amount of saliva in the mouth
- saliva which is thick, stringy or rope-like.

Natural teeth



Tooth decay (Caries)

Tooth decay is a diet and oral hygiene related infectious disease which affects the teeth and causes pain.

Check for:

- holes in teeth
- brown or discoloured teeth
- broken teeth
- bad breath
- oral pain and tooth sensitivity
- difficulty eating meals
- changed behaviour.



Root decay (Root Caries)

Gums recede and the surface of the tooth root is exposed.

Decay can develop very quickly because the tooth root is not as hard as tooth enamel.

Check for:

- tooth sensitivity
- brown discoloration near the gum line
- bad breath
- difficulty eating meals
- changed behaviour.



Retained roots

The crown of the tooth has broken or decayed away.

Check for:

- broken teeth
- exposed tooth roots
- oral pain
- swelling
- bad breath
- trauma to surrounding tissues from sharp tooth edges
- difficulty eating meals
- changed behaviour.

Dentures



Requiring attention

The denture is in need of repair or attention.

Check for:

- client's name on the denture
- chipped or missing teeth on the denture
- chipped or broken acrylic (pink) areas on the denture
- bent or broken metal wires or clips on a partial denture.



Poorly fitting

A denture can cause irritation and trauma to gums and oral tissues.



Check for:

- dentures being a matching set, particularly if the client has several sets of dentures
- denture movement when the client is speaking or eating
- client's refusal to wear the denture
- overgrowth of oral tissue under the denture
- ulcers and sore spots caused by wearing the denture.

Oral cleanliness



Poor oral hygiene

Poor oral hygiene allows the bacteria in dental plaque to produce acids and other substances that damage the teeth, gums and surrounding bone.



Dental plaque begins as an invisible film that sticks to all surfaces of the teeth, including the spaces between the teeth and gums. It forms continuously and must be removed by regular brushing. If dental plaque is not removed, it hardens into calculus (tartar).



Check for:

- build up of dental plaque on teeth, particularly at the gum line
- calculus on teeth, particularly at the gum line
- calculus on denture
- unclean denture
- bleeding gums
- bad breath
- coated tongue
- food left in the mouth.

Oral health reporting guide

Reporting guide

Lips

- dry, chapped or red at corners of mouth.

Tongue

- a coated, red or sore tongue.

Gums and oral tissue

- bleeding gums
- ulcers and sore spots
- swollen face.

Saliva

- complaints of dry mouth
- lack of saliva
- saliva is thick or stringy
- difficulty with eating and or speaking.

Natural teeth

- broken or discoloured teeth
- loose teeth
- tooth sensitivity.

Dentures

- broken dentures
- loose dentures
- refusal to wear denture.

Oral cleanliness

- build-up of dental plaque/calculus on teeth
- unclean dentures
- food left in mouth
- constant bad breath.

Dental pain:

- complains of dental pain
- refuses oral care
- changes in behaviour (irritable, restless)
- appears to have lost weight.

Emergency

Report immediately

- swollen face
- uncontrollable pain
- uncontrollable bleeding
- trauma.

Other

Bathroom

- no toothbrush or toothpaste
- toothbrush and toothpaste not used
- toothbrush frayed
- blood on toothbrush or in basin.

Kitchen

- increased food wastage in bin
- increased left-over meals in fridge.

Shopping

- oral health care products not on list
- replace toothbrush every 3 months.

Meal preparation

- difficulty eating or not finishing meals
- change in food preferences.