

DENTAL CARE AND HUNTINGTON DISEASE

As an individual experiences the symptoms of Huntington disease (HD), dental care can become more challenging. It may be more difficult to attend dental appointments and maintain regular personal oral care. Starting good dental habits early can help make dental care easier as HD progresses. This fact sheet offers practical strategies for dental care for individuals living with HD as well as their personal and professional caregivers.

The Challenges HD Presents for Dental Health

- It can be hard to open the mouth wide or stay still during dental care due to involuntary movements.
- Apathy, a common symptom, may lead to a decrease in personal care.
- HD may lead to swollen gums and loose teeth.
- A high-calorie diet, often needed for HD, may include more sugar, which can lead to tooth decay.

Helpful Self-Care Strategies

- Visit your dental care provider every six months. Changes in diet and daily oral care, as well as medication use, can lead to changes in the mouth.
- Check dentures often to make sure they are still fitting well.
- Using a suction toothbrush, electric toothbrush, water picks, and/or air flossers may be easier and can clean the mouth better.
- Use a fluoride toothpaste daily.
- Try xylitol-based toothpaste, mints, gum, and tablets to help ease dry mouth caused by some medications. Using xylitol instead of sugar in these products reduces the risk of tooth decay.
- Avoid eating 30 minutes before bed. You produce less saliva while sleeping. Not having enough saliva to clear away remaining food bits can make choking and tooth decay more likely.

Preparing for a Dental Appointment

- Ask your pharmacy for a list of your current medications and bring it to your appointment.
- Tell the dental staff about any pain, concerns, or changes in your mouth. Let them know if you need specific help during the appointment.
- Bring dental items to be cleaned, like a bite plate or retainer.
- Brush and floss your teeth before you go.
- It can help to have your caregiver in the room during the visit.
- Review your schedule so you can book your next appointment before leaving the dental office. It will likely be in six months' time.

Strategies for Dental Professionals

- Book longer-than-average visits at times that do not disrupt the patient's usual routine.
- Have a dental assistant help the hygienist or dentist if needed.
- Use support cushions and a semi-reclined chair to help the patient relax and stay still.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Give extra time for answers, as speech may be slow or slurred.
- Use white noise, music, or headphones to block out distractions.
- Watch for signs of choking or swallowing problems during care.
- For patients with strong involuntary movements, talk to their doctor or neurologist.

Occupational Therapy Strategies to Help Dental Care

An occupational therapist (OT) can help someone with HD manage dental care by:

- Practising using alternative tools for brushing and flossing.
- Helping create daily routines and visual schedules to support regular brushing and flossing.
- Advising on safe and comfortable positions for brushing, especially with balance or motor issues.
- Recommending strategies to reduce the risk of fatigue and choking during oral care.

Despite the challenges posed by HD symptoms, maintaining good dental health remains essential for eating, speaking, and overall well-being. Thank you to Delayne Hamlin, hygienist with Lawson Dental, for reviewing this content.

RESOURCES

Canadian Dental Association at <https://www.cda-adc.ca/en/index.asp>

For individual or group support from HSC, click here contactme.cloud/form/huntingtonsociety.

For ongoing support and education after you have connected with HSC, contact your local Resource Centre Director (RCD): www.huntingtonsociety.ca/family-services-team-list/

Fact sheets for individuals, families, and friends impacted by HD are available here: www.hdfactsheets.ca

Guides for caregivers and healthcare professionals caring for someone with HD are available here: www.huntingtonsociety.ca/hd-booklets-and-publications/

- A Physician's Guide to the Management of Huntington Disease
- Understanding Behaviour in Huntington Disease: A Guide for Professionals
- A Carer's Guide for Huntington Disease (Page 16 has a helpful section on dental care)