



## Dementia-Friendly Dentists

People with dementia have ongoing needs related to caring for their teeth, gums, and mouth. Dentists and dental hygienists can assess oral care and make special recommendations for management based on the unique needs of a patient with dementia. While the experience may occur anywhere from rarely to frequently, dental professionals are likely to encounter people with dementia in the course of their work. In fact, 70 percent of those with dementia live within the community rather than in an adult care facility. As a dementia-friendly dental office, you can provide a higher level of customer service and health care to all members of the community.

### WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is a term used to describe the symptoms of more than 100 conditions that are characterized by a decline in memory or other thinking skills that affect a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

### SIGNS OF DEMENTIA

Many dementias are progressive, with signs and symptoms starting out slowly and gradually getting worse. While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, at least two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:

- Judgment
- Perception
- Reasoning
- Organizational abilities
- Memory
- Abstract thinking
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Orientation to time and place
- Awareness of socially appropriate norms
- Ability to filter emotional responses

### WHAT IS A DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY PRACTICE?

Dementia-friendly businesses recognize the challenges that accompany dementia and help enable people with dementia to have a good quality of life. Their personnel are able to recognize the signs of dementia, communicate with people with dementia, and locate resources and assistance for themselves and for the people they serve.

### DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY PRACTICE GUIDELINES

- Train all members of management and at least 50 percent of front-line staff.
- Designate a team leader to speak on behalf of the practice.
- Be open to discussions regarding environment changes (lighting, signage, etc.).
- Share all training materials with new hires and those unable to attend the in-person trainings.
- Encourage all new employees to take the free, 20-minute online training found at [www.uwosh.edu/dementia](http://www.uwosh.edu/dementia), listed under "Additional Courses" in the left navigation.



## DEMENTIA IN DENTAL OFFICES

People with dementia have challenges maintaining good oral health due to changes in their cognitive status and functional ability. Older adults have additional oral health challenges that put them at higher risk for many dental conditions. Cognitive issues can make it difficult for the person to remember the tasks needed to properly care for their oral health. Decreased dexterity resulting from conditions like arthritis may lead to the person requiring adaptive aids to facilitate performing oral health care tasks. People in more advanced stages of the disease may not be able to communicate their needs and are at higher risk of experiencing pain and oral disease.

Caregivers who have firsthand knowledge of the preferences and personality of the patient with dementia can provide vital information to the oral health care provider on strategies for a successful dental care experience. Every person with dementia should be screened regularly for oral health changes, with plans provided to address these changes. The oral health care provider should allow a family member or friend to sit by the person as a calming influence. Long periods sitting in a dental chair may be difficult for people with dementia; limit the length of appointments when possible.

Practice good chairside manner and always alert the person to what is about to happen to help maintain cooperation. The oral health care provider may need to reintroduce himself/herself multiple times throughout the appointment. Nonverbal communication, such as smiling, a gentle touch, and pointing or mimicking, may result in a better oral health care experience for the patient. It is crucial for the person with dementia, the caregiver, and the oral health care provider to work together.

## RESOURCES

For more information on dementia and how to become dementia-friendly, visit:

- Is It Dementia: A Resource for Recognizing the Signs of Dementia  
<http://isitdementia.com.au>
- A Toolkit for Building Dementia-Friendly Communities  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01000.pdf>
- Adult Protective Services  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/aps/index.htm>
- Dementia Care Specialist  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/dementia-care-specialist-program.htm>
- Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC)  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/consumer/index.htm>
- Alzheimer's Association  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)
- Alzheimer's and Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin  
[www.alzwise.org](http://www.alzwise.org)
- CDC Healthy Brain Initiative  
[www.cdc.gov/aging/healthybrain](http://www.cdc.gov/aging/healthybrain)

