



## Supporting the Oral Health of Enrollees With Special Needs



**AmeriHealth** *Caritas*  
District of Columbia



# Contents

|          |                                                      |           |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Enrollees With Special Needs</b>                  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Before Beginning Care</b>                         | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Considerations During Treatment</b>               | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Supporting Enrollees' Long-Term Dental Health</b> | <b>10</b> |

# A Guide for Dental Care Providers

Many individuals find oral hygiene and visits to a dentist's office challenging and stressful. For individuals with special needs, however, there can be additional difficulties associated with caring for their oral health.

This brochure aims to provide you with insight into enrollees with special needs and the barriers they face with regard to their oral health, as well as how you can help them feel more comfortable in your office and with their dental care routine.

1



## Enrollees With Special Needs

Patients with special needs include individuals who<sup>1</sup>

- are aging or elderly,
- have mobility issues,
- have mental or intellectual disabilities,
- are immunocompromised or who have complex medical problems (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, bleeding disorders),
- have a mental illness, or
- are children who have behavioral or emotional conditions (e.g., autism, ADHD).

<sup>1</sup>“Dentistry for Patients With Special Needs,” Consumer Guide to Dentistry, <https://www.yourdentistryguide.com/special-needs/>.

<sup>2</sup>Tracye A. Moore, RDH, MS, EdD, “Dental Care for Patients With Special Needs,” *Decisions in Dentistry*, Vol. 2, No. 9, 2016, pp. 50 – 53. <https://decisionsindentistry.com/article/dental-care-patients-special-needs/>



Individuals with special needs can face numerous barriers to accessing dental care, including the following:<sup>2</sup>

- Inability to pay for care
- Reliance on Medicare and Medicaid
- Private insurance that does not cover dental care or the cost of modified treatments
- Psychosocial issues (e.g., dental anxiety, low oral health literacy)
- Language barriers
- Sensory issues (e.g., vision or hearing problems)
- Limited transportation options
- Inaccessible dental offices (e.g., offices that lack a wheelchair ramp)
- Cultural barriers (e.g., providers who lack training in cultural competency or experience treating patients with special needs)



## 2

# Before Beginning Care



**Preparing to meet with and treat an enrollee is essential to ensuring you can meet the patient's needs:**<sup>3,4</sup>

- Have an **efficient approach** to care to keep appointments short, and offer flexible scheduling.
- **Understand** the individual's medical, physical, mental, or behavioral conditions and how those conditions affect his or her needs and oral health care.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> "Dentistry for Patients With Special Needs."

- **Communicate** with physicians, social workers, nurses, or others on the treatment team so you can ensure the enrollee receives safe and effective treatment.
- Make sure the individual or a caregiver provides **informed consent** after receiving information on treatment, such as the nature, risks, and benefits of the treatment; any evidence-based alternatives; an explanation about the need for any stabilization; and possible complications.
- **Speak with the caregiver** about the ideal time of day for treatment, behavior management, help communicating, and other information that will enable you to make the patient feel more comfortable.
- **Check that your dental office** is wheelchair accessible. Consider how a wheelchair could be modified to mimic the dental chair or whether you could perform any procedures while standing if a patient cannot be transferred from the wheelchair.
- **Prepare for treatment** by reviewing logistics such as the individual's medical history, timing for bathroom breaks, completion of any forms, and transportation issues.
- Use a **"tell-show-do"** approach before the appointment to reduce anxiety about care.



### 3

## Considerations During Treatment

Here are a few ways to help patients with special needs feel comfortable during treatment:<sup>5,6</sup>

- **Have enough assistants** during exams and procedures to help you monitor the patient.
- **Use sedation** if it will keep the patient comfortable during longer appointments.
- **Pay attention** to the patient's body language so you are aware of any discomfort, particularly if the patient is not verbal or has any impairments that may affect communication.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> "Dentistry for Patients With Special Needs."



- **Be aware** of your own body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.
- **Communicate with the patient** in a way that is appropriate for his or her comprehension level. For instance, if an enrollee has a hearing impairment but can read lips, be sure to speak face-to-face so the patient can see what you say. You could also offer paper for the enrollee to write messages if that method is preferred.
- **Assess how to address the needs of patients** who have balance issues or exhibit aggressive behaviors, both of which could require supportive and protective stabilization (e.g., using pillows or rolled blankets to stabilize the head or rubber bite blocks for oral stabilization).

## 4



## Supporting Enrollees' Long-Term Dental Health

Help your patients with special needs stay on track for long-term dental health:<sup>7,8,9</sup>

- **Modify** self-care devices, such as by adding grips to toothbrushes so individuals with mobility issues can brush their teeth more easily and effectively. You could work with other members of the patient's care team, such as occupational therapists, to determine what supports are necessary.
- **Recommend** that patients use electric toothbrushes and floss holders, as these can encourage compliance with the suggested dental regimen.
- **Offer** alternative toothpaste options (e.g., those without sodium laurel sulfate) if the taste or texture of traditional toothpastes causes a problem for someone with sensory issues.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "Dentistry for Patients With Special Needs."

<sup>9</sup> American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, "Management of Dental Patients With Special Health Care Needs," *The Reference Manual of Pediatric Dentistry*, 2021, pp. 287 – 294.



- **Provide** caregivers with information about the importance of oral health, oral hygiene techniques, and the ways they can support an enrollee's oral health. It's important that caregivers understand how oral health can impact overall health and well-being.
- **Demonstrate** appropriate techniques to both enrollees and caregivers on how to effectively clean their teeth.
- **Think** about any preventive options (e.g., fluoride treatments, antimicrobials, sealants) that could help a patient maintain long-term oral health.
- **Be clear** with the enrollee and any caregivers about how often the patient should have dental check-ups, as well as regular visits with a dental hygienist. (Regular appointments can also help build trust between the enrollee and the dental care team, which may make visits easier in the long run.)
- **Encourage** a non-cariogenic diet to prevent dental disease, and review a patient's medications for any possible oral side effects.



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