



# Dementia Friendly Dental Practices and Dentists

Dental practices play a vital role in supporting the oral health and comfort of people living with dementia. This Dementia Friendly America Sector Guide outlines practical actions that dentists, hygienists, assistants and office staff can take to provide supportive and accessible dental visits for people living with dementia and their care partners, with simple steps to strengthen communication, improve the environment and adapt care approaches.

## UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

Dementia is a general term used to describe a group of symptoms that affect memory, thinking, communication and decision-making in ways that interfere with daily life. It is not a normal part of aging. Common symptoms include memory loss, confusion, trouble finding words, difficulty planning or solving problems and changes in mood or behavior. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. Other types include Vascular Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia and Frontotemporal Dementia.

In dental settings, bright lights, unfamiliar tools and close contact may increase confusion or anxiety.

## BUILD DEMENTIA AWARENESS

Provide dementia-awareness training for all for all dental team members, including front-desk, clinical and support staff through programs such as Dementia Friends or invite local experts to lead educational sessions or workshops.

Support employees who are providing care to someone with dementia by offering flexible scheduling, access to employee assistance programs or referrals to resources like the Eldercare Locator and the Alzheimer's Association Helpline.

## COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND RESPECTFULLY

**Smile and greet patients warmly.** A calm, friendly introduction builds comfort and trust.

**Use a gentle, reassuring tone.** Speak kindly to reduce anxiety before and during treatment.

**Engage the person before speaking.** Say their name, make eye contact and face them directly before giving instructions.

**Speak slowly and clearly.** Use short, simple sentences to explain what will happen—such as “I’m going to look at your teeth now.”

**Ask one question at a time.** Offer simple, concrete choices like “Would you like to rinse now or later?”

**Allow extra time for responses.** Pause patiently—avoid interrupting or finishing sentences.

**Rephrase if something isn’t understood.** Use simpler words or repeat key points to confirm understanding.

**Reduce distractions.** Limit background noise and side conversations when communicating.

**Involve care partners when appropriate.** Include them when explaining treatment or after-care to support understanding and follow-through.

**Confirm appointments with the patient and care partner.** Provide reminders using clear language and visual cues and allow extra time for check-in and conversation.

## OPTIMIZE DENTAL TREATMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

**Use calm voices and soft lighting.** A quiet, soothing environment helps patients feel relaxed and safe.

**Move slowly and use gentle touch.** Slow, steady movements build reassurance during care.

**Warn before bright lights or noisy tools.** Predictable cues may prevent surprise or confusion.

**Demonstrate procedures before starting.** Showing what will happen helps patients anticipate each step.

**Provide reassurance throughout care.** Explain what you're doing and how long each step will take.

**Offer familiar supports.** Allow care partners, music or comfort items when helpful to ease stress.

**Provide written after-care instructions.** Use large print and plain language for clarity and ease of use.

**Schedule early and brief appointments.** Short, predictable visits help patients stay alert and comfortable.

**Stay flexible.** Adjust the pace or treatment if mood, alertness or cooperation changes.

**Go with the flow.** Move with—not against—the patient's rhythm; allow rest breaks and re-approach later if agitation occurs.

## DETECT COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT

**Observe for early signs of change.** Note confusion, difficulty following instructions or changes in hygiene or recall.

**Screen when concerns arise.** Use a brief, validated tool such as the Mini-Cog® during appointments.

**Encourage medical follow-up.** Reassure patients that many causes of memory loss can be treated or managed.

## ASSESS DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY

**Confirm comprehension.** Ask the patient to explain, in their own words, the treatment purpose, benefits and risks.

**Respect autonomy.** Involve the patient as much as possible; use substituted judgment (what the person would choose) when capacity fluctuates.

## ENSURE SAFE AND APPROPRIATE PAIN CONTROL

**Use the minimal effective anesthesia.** Favor short-acting local anesthetics and avoid long-acting blocks when possible.

**Monitor after anesthesia.** Watch for confusion or lip and tongue chewing; remind care partners to do the same at home.

**Choose acetaminophen first-line for pain.** Use NSAIDs and opioids cautiously, considering fall and confusion risks.

**Use nitrous oxide carefully.** It may reduce stress but isn't suitable for all older adults.

## SUPPORT CARE PARTNERS

**Demonstrate oral hygiene techniques during appointments.** Show care partners how to support brushing and rinsing routines at home.

**Recommend adaptive tools.** Suggest angled toothbrushes, electric brushes or mouth props to simplify daily care.

**Share resources.** Refer care partners to the Eldercare Locator and Alzheimer's Association Helpline.

## FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Become a Dementia Friend  
[dfamerica.org/become-a-dementia-friend/](https://dfamerica.org/become-a-dementia-friend/)

Alzheimer's Association Helpline  
800-272-3900 | [www.alz.org](https://www.alz.org)



Find or Start a Memory Cafe  
[dfamerica.org/](https://dfamerica.org/)

Eldercare Locator  
800-677-1116 | [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)



Scan or visit  
[dfamerica.org/resource-listing](https://dfamerica.org/resource-listing)



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