



Supporting better oral care in care homes: Oral care policy for adult care homes

December 2023



This document sets out what we expect to be included in an oral care policy and what you should consider when developing one for your organisation.

Why is oral health important?

A clean, healthy mouth is fundamental to a person's quality of life and a basic human right. Oral diseases and conditions are painful and distressing. They have an impact on a person's ability to eat, speak and smile, and are increasingly linked to a number of other health problems, some of which are serious. These can include, for example, heart disease, diabetes, dementia, malnutrition and pneumonia.

People living in care homes are at greater risk of oral health problems and related conditions because of high levels of dependency, co-existing medical conditions, effects of medication, reduced functional ability and dementia or other cognitive impairments¹.

¹[Improving oral health for adults in care homes](#) | [Quick guides to social care topics](#) | [Social care](#) | [NICE Communities](#) | [About](#) | [NICE](#)





Why have an oral care policy?

Providing good oral care for people experiencing care can be challenging due to factors such as care-related stress and distress. However, to safeguard the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people, good day-to-day oral care is crucial and developing an oral care policy will help your staff deliver the best oral care.

This guide will help you consider what should be in your oral care policy and how this will relate to your service.



Oral care policy sections



What should be the aims and objectives of an oral care policy?

The first part of developing a policy is to include a statement about what you want to achieve in delivery of oral care, such as meeting the oral health needs of people experiencing care to promote good oral health and general health. We would also expect that staff working in the service recognise and promote oral care as a core element of personal care.

What best practice should inform the policy?
This should be based on current best evidence and the [Health & Social Care Standards](#). Current guidance can be found in the [Caring for Smiles](#) (dependent older adults) / [Open Wide](#) (adults with additional care needs) guides and also in the [Supporting Better Oral Care in Care Homes](#) document on the Care Inspectorate Hub.

What are the staff responsibilities?

The policy should state the staff's role and responsibilities in delivering oral care, including who undertakes the oral health risk assessment, transfers any information to a care plan and who delivers day-to-day oral care. The pre-admission assessment may highlight oral health information, however, oral health should still be included in your assessment when a person comes into your service. The policy should also state the staff's responsibility for referring to dental services if they notice changes or have concerns about a person's mouth.

Oral care policy sections



Who should see the policy?

The policy should be shared with staff, people experiencing care, and those important to them to promote use of the oral care policy within your service. If appropriate, staff could sign to acknowledge reading the policy. In addition to reading the policy, it is also important that staff are trained in delivering oral care.

Which staff receive oral care training?

It is important that staff providing oral care are trained to deliver this. Caring for Smiles and Open Wide provide a range of training for staff. There are also opportunities to complete foundation and intermediate levels of accredited Caring for Smiles and Open Wide training. You should consider which staff should be offered training (for example, those who provide personal care) and which staff could be offered the opportunity to complete foundation and intermediate training.

If you wish, a staff member could become an oral health champion as a point of contact for other staff within the service. This could be a trainer at your organisation level or someone within the individual care home. Mouth care is everyone's business and having an oral health champion should not stop all staff becoming competent in providing mouth care. Once trained, staff will be able to complete the oral health risk assessment, care plan and deliver mouth care as described on the next page.

Oral care policy sections

What assessment will be made of a person's oral health?

You should undertake an oral health risk assessment when someone is admitted to your care home.

Areas to consider when writing the policy section on oral health risk assessment.

- Who will complete the oral health risk assessment?
- How soon after arrival in the care home should the oral health risk assessment be undertaken? (Recommended early after admission as part of an overall health assessment, ideally within 48 hours.)
- How often will the oral health risk assessment be updated? (Ideally monthly, but no longer than six months between assessments.)

Example oral health risk assessments are available in the Caring for Smiles/Open Wide guides or from your local oral health teams.

What care planning will be made for oral care?

Information from the oral health risk assessment should be transferred to a care plan.

Areas to consider when writing the policy section on care planning.

- Who will transfer the information to a care plan?
- How will the care plan be shared with staff delivering oral care?
- What is the oral care policy for palliative/end of life care?
- How will the care plan be evaluated and how often?

Example oral care plans are available in the Caring for Smiles/Open Wide guides or from your local oral health teams.

Oral care policy sections

How will daily care be documented?

Information on the day-to-day oral care delivered should be documented by the staff member who delivered it.

Areas to consider when writing the policy section on documenting day-to-day care.

- How will information be passed from one staff member to another at, for example, shift changes?
- How will an issue in the mouth (for example, any changes noticed) be recorded and escalated for action/referral to dental services?

Example daily care documentation is available in the Caring for Smiles/Open Wide guides or from your local oral health teams.

What is your denture loss policy?

It is not unusual for a person's dentures to be lost. It can also be difficult for staff who find a denture to be sure who it belongs to.

Prevention of denture loss:

- ensure dentures are marked with the person's name (please see below for more information on this)
- ensure checking of tissues/bedlinens or pockets for dentures prior to throwing out or washing.

If dentures are lost:

- who will record this and arrange for a dental professional to be contacted regarding this?

What is your denture marking policy?

On admission to the care home, it is useful to consider how you will check if the dentures are already marked with the person's name. Things to consider when writing the policy.

- Who will ask about dentures, if they are marked, and record this?
- If dentures are not marked, who will mark these? You can seek advice from your local Caring for Smiles/Open Wide teams.
- Who will continue to check dentures remain marked? This can rub off over time.

What is the procedure to refer to dental professionals?

People experiencing care should be supported, if they wish and if this is possible, to continue to receive care from their own dentist. However, if a person is not registered with a dentist, a protocol should be put in place to register the person with a dentist or to contact the local Caring for Smiles/Open Wide team for assistance with this.

- Who will ask and record if the person is registered with a dentist?
- Who will facilitate dental registration, following local protocols, if not registered?
- In what way will routine dental treatment be facilitated and recorded?

At times a person may need additional care from dental professionals if changes are noted.

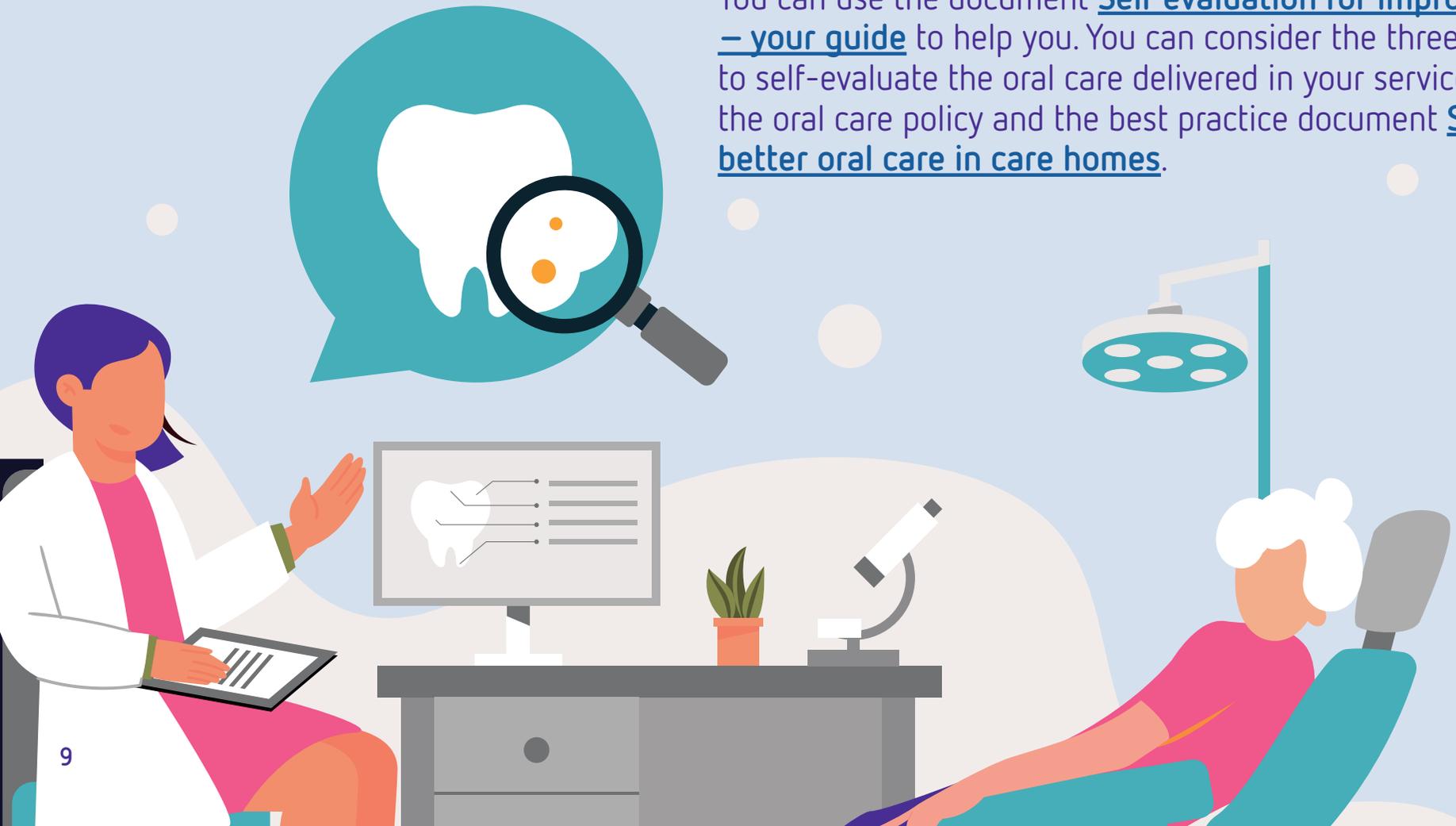
- Who should staff contact within your service when they notice changes in a person's mouth, for example, a broken tooth or problems with dentures? Your local Caring for Smiles/Open Wide team can help with local procedures on what to do.
- Who contacts dental services when there is a change in a person's mouth?
- How are dental services contacted?
- What is the referral route for dental services?



What auditing/monitoring of oral care is made?

How will you ensure that people experiencing care have healthy mouths that keep them living well?

You can use the document [Self evaluation for improvement – your guide](#) to help you. You can consider the three questions to self-evaluate the oral care delivered in your service against the oral care policy and the best practice document [Supporting better oral care in care homes](#).



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