ON THE ROAD TO
WELLNESS
North Dakota Disability Health Project
Promoting the health and wellness of people with disabilities
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Oral Health

Many people with disabilities are underserved in the dental community. Multiple factors contribute to poor oral health: a shortage of dentists in rural North Dakota with an undersupply serving in the more rural areas, limited mobility, lack of transportation serving the rural population, and financial barriers. Oral health is important to total health. The mouth is the lifeline for people with disabilities, and is considered the center of the personality.

Oral health care is the most common unmet healthcare need among children and adults with disabilities in ND. In a 2004 BRFSS survey, 38% of people with disabilities had not visited a dentist or dental hygienist within the past year as compared to 28% of people without disabilities. Managing good oral hygiene can be challenging. Oral diseases can impact some health problems and conditions if not addressed; compromised immune systems and cardiac conditions can make a person vulnerable to the effects of oral diseases; and, some people may not have the ability to be responsible or to cooperate with preventive oral health care practices.

Barriers and Challenges to Oral Health Care:

- Parents and caregivers may lack education and resources on appropriate self-care, healthy eating, and getting regular dental care;
- Professional dental workforce shortages;
- Undersupply of dentists serving in the rural areas;
- Dentists lack the knowledge and skills to provide dental care to people with disabilities;
- Lack of health practitioners trained in oral health promotion to manage dental care as part of comprehensive health care and care coordination with specialists and other health professionals; and
- Financial barriers due to lack of oral health coverage, and tighter eligibility requirements for Medicaid benefits, especially for complex oral issues.

Chronic Conditions and Oral Health

People with disabilities are at increased risk to develop:

- Common oral diseases such as cavities and periodontal disease;
- Underlying medical conditions due to health related issues from oral diseases;
- Medications, special diet and oral motor habits can cause dental problems; and
- Oral and craniofacial problems, such as crowding of teeth, can affect long-term health and quality of life.

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Dental Treatment Considerations:

- Communicate to the patient's level of functioning,
- Rooms should be large enough to accommodate wheelchairs, and the person in the wheelchair must be transferred to the dental chair in a safe manner,
- Depending on the disability, the dental chair may require special adjustments,
- The client's medical condition may require changes in treatment protocol,
- The patient's ability to cooperate with dental procedures will vary and a variety of strategies such as behavior modification and pharmacological sedation may need to be considered.

Promote Best Practice:

Some strategies for integration of oral health includes:

- Maintain an online list of dentists that are willing and have the knowledge/ skills to provide services to people with special health care needs;
- Provide training to caregivers and people with disabilities about the importance of hygiene procedures, oral cancer checks, nutrition concerns and routine professional dental care;
- Potential sources of payment could be identified to help individuals that cannot meet the cost of treatment;
- Promote appropriate self-care, healthy eating and regular dental care;
- Access information that provides education and promotes oral health; and
- Establish a relationship with your dentist.

North Dakota participates in a number of programs that can assist people with disabilities. Some of these programs are the Donated Dental Services (DDS) program through the National Foundation of Dentistry for the Handicapped (NFDH), the Red River Dental Access Project, the Dental Home Initiative in ND received funds to provide educational resources, training and technical assistance to Head Start programs, and ND Medicaid can provide a list of dental care providers who accept Medicaid. The ND Dental Association recognizes the need for increased dental access, and has worked with the ND legislature to increase payments to providers for services. Some dentists in ND volunteer to provide dental care at no charge to people of all ages who lack adequate income to pay for dental care. A collaborate effort by community agencies, public policy makers and the private sector is needed to address the oral health needs of people with disabilities.

Sources:

- Dental Care Considerations for Disabled Adults/www.dental.ufl.edu
- Oral Health Facts/www.ndhealth.gov/oralhealth

Additional Resources:

- Donated Dental Services Program/www.nfdh.org
- Red River Valley Dental Access Project/www.rrdentalaccess.com

The ND Disability Health Project can provide technical assistance to assist with health promotion, staff training and education, and disability awareness. Contact us at 800.233.1737 or visit our website at www.ndcpd.org/health

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Vision:

All people in ND have access to information and services they need to maintain good health and wellness. There are no health disparities between people with and without disabilities that are based solely on the presence of a disability.

Pay It Forward.....

Pass it on to others who may find this information helpful.

Health-related information provided in this fact sheet is for informational purposes only and should not replace advice from a medical professional. The ND Disability Health Project is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through a grant (1 u59 DD000278) to the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities at Minot State University. Opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the CDC.