MS (multiple sclerosis) does not directly make you any more likely to get dental diseases than other people. But people with MS sometimes have difficulties in maintaining good oral hygiene and accessing care. This can increase the risk of dental health problems.\textsuperscript{1,2,3}

Why is oral health important?

By 'oral health', we mean the health of the mouth, teeth, tongue and gums. Good oral health is important for eating, swallowing, smiling and talking. Prevention is the most important part of oral care, and regular visits to the dentist are essential to help you maintain good oral health and to avoid decay, dry mouth and fungal infections.

How might MS affect my oral health?

Stiffness, weakness or muscle spasms can all affect someone's ability to brush or floss their teeth properly, or to receive treatment.\textsuperscript{4,5} Long-term medications can also make it more difficult to maintain oral health, either because they cause dry mouth or ulcers, or because they are sugar-based, causing tooth decay.\textsuperscript{4} It can also be more difficult to go to see a dentist if you have problems getting about. There's more on this later in the factsheet.

Some people with MS can have a severe facial pain, known as trigeminal neuralgia. This can be mistaken for toothache. If you have facial pain, it is important to discuss it with your GP as well as your dentist, as it could avoid any unnecessary dental work. The Trigeminal Neuralgia Association has more information: www.tna.org.uk or call them on 01883 370214.
Dry mouth

Dry mouth is when you don't have enough saliva to keep your mouth wet. Tooth decay, infection and gum disease are more common in people with a dry mouth, so it is essential to consult your dentist if this is an issue for you.

Saliva is important for lubricating food and starting the process of digestion. It helps keep the mouth (teeth, tongue and gums) clean, by protecting against infection and neutralising acids. It also helps with clear speech and swallowing.

There are a number of medications, including diuretics and anti-depressants, that can reduce the production of saliva. This can make eating, talking, wearing dentures and oral hygiene more difficult. Smoking also increases the risk of a dry mouth.

There are various products available to manage dry mouth. High street chemists will be able to order them for you - few will keep them in stock in the store. Your GP can also prescribe some.

Oral thrush

Oral thrush is caused by a fungus called candida. It is present in most people's mouths but, in certain circumstances, it can cause an infection in the mouth. It most commonly affects people who wear dentures. But other people are also at higher risk of developing the condition: people with dry mouth; people who have difficulty keeping their mouth clean; and people who take steroids. Using some antibiotics can also result in the development of oral thrush. Your dentist will be able to give you advice on how to deal with it if this is a problem for you.

Nutrition

If you are not getting enough essential elements and vitamins in your diet, this can affect your oral health. Many experts consider vitamin C particularly important for good oral health - though there is no evidence that high doses are more effective than the standard recommended amount. The Eatwell website, www.eatwell.gov.uk, has tips on diet and nutrition. You may also find the MS Society's publication Diet and nutrition useful.
Smoking and cannabis

Smoking cannabis can affect the nerve endings in the mouth, masking any sensitivity that may be occurring. Cannabis is illegal in the UK. Smoking in general can also increase a person’s risk of developing gum disease or tooth loss.

Amalgam fillings

In the past, it has been suggested that the removal of dental amalgam is therapeutic for MS. Amalgam, which is composed of mercury as well as silver, copper, tin and zinc, is used in 80 to 90 per cent of tooth restorations. It is claimed that the immune system and nervous system are damaged by small amounts of solid mercury and mercury vapour released from the amalgam. There is no evidence that mercury causes MS or that the removal of dental amalgam improves the course of MS. Furthermore, it has been estimated that amalgam accounts for only 10 per cent or less of mercury intake.

Dental amalgam removal is generally expensive, though there are few risks associated with it. On rare occasions, it may cause injury to nerves or tooth structure. Many dentists are sympathetic to concerns a person with MS may have, and will often use alternatives to amalgam for fillings.

Advice on attending a dental practice

It is likely that you will know much more about MS than your dentist. It is important that you tell your dentist that you have MS and how it affects you. Also tell them if you are taking any medication (and update them each time it changes), or if you have any specific symptoms that may interfere with dental treatment, such as spasms. Establish a signal that you can give the dentist to stop treatment if you feel unwell, or need a rest.

Not all dental practices are fully accessible, and you may find it particularly difficult if you are looking for a dental practice that is both accessible and willing to take NHS patients. You should check with the practice whether they have the facilities you need, such as suitable parking or toilets.

If you are sensitive to light, you might find the dentist’s light uncomfortable. To avoid this, they will often have special glasses that you can wear.
Overcoming and avoiding problems

Brushing
- If you have difficulty brushing your teeth or dentures, ask your occupational therapist or dentist about adaptations that can be made to your toothbrush.
- Electric toothbrushes can also help.
- Carers can help you to brush your teeth or dentures if you have difficulty doing it effectively.

Mouthwash and flossing
- Ask your dentist if you would benefit from using a fluoride or chlorhexidine mouthwash.
- If you are having problems using floss, ask your dentist about interdental brushes, as they may be easier to use.

Dry mouth
- Chew sugar-free gum (rather than sucking mints or other sweets) to increase saliva flow, or have frequent sips of water.
- Ask your dentist if you would benefit from the use of a saliva substitute.

Dentists are unlikely to have 'transfer boards' in their surgery, so if you are a wheelchair user and you need help transferring to the dental chair, you should arrange for your carer to attend the dentist with you. If you are unable to transfer and your wheelchair will not recline, this may limit the treatment you can receive, so it's worth arranging this before your appointment.

If your carer helps with your oral health, your dentist will need to know this so that they can discuss things properly with both of you - if you are happy for them to do so. It might be helpful to discuss any concerns about your oral health with your carer before the visit.

Most practices will be able to arrange appointment times that fit in with your needs, such as problems with fatigue or arranging transport. It is important to tell the receptionist if you will need extra time to get into or out of the surgery. All this information can be added to your records, so that you don't have to go into detail every time you make an appointment.
How do I find a dentist?

The best source of information can be to ask those who live nearby where they go and if the practice is accessible. Your local MS Society branch might have this information. For details of your local branch, contact the Information Team (contact details at the end of this factsheet). Alternatively, ask your MS nurse or dentist to suggest an appropriate practice.

If you are already registered:

- If you can no longer access the practice you normally attend, you should ask the dental staff how you can continue to receive regular dental care. Your dentist should be able to suggest another dental practice that is accessible, treat you in your own home ('domiciliary care') or, alternatively, offer to refer you to the community dental services in your area.

- It is important not to let your NHS registration lapse. If you have not attended the dentist for 15 months, under NHS regulations you will no longer be registered at this practice - your contract with this dentist automatically expires. The dentist does not have to inform you that you are no longer registered as an NHS patient, and is not obliged to re-register you as a patient with the practice under an NHS contract.

If you are not registered:

- Your local PCT (England), health board (Scotland and Wales) or health and social services board (Northern Ireland) may be able to provide you with a list of accessible practices.

Nutrition

- Snacks containing sugar, high energy supplements or meal replacement drinks can increase the risk of decay.

- Reduce your intake of sugar in drinks and foods, limiting it to mealtimes as much as possible.

- Drinks containing acid, such as carbonated drinks, fruit juices or wine, can affect your teeth by causing erosion of the enamel. Again, try to limit them to mealtimes.

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Do I have to pay for NHS dental treatment?

Not everyone has to pay for dental treatment. If you live anywhere in the UK and come under any of the following categories you are entitled to free NHS dental treatment:

- You are aged 18 or under, or 19 and in full-time education
- You are pregnant or you have had a baby in the last 12 months
- You or your partner get Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, or income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- You or your partner are in receipt of Pension Credit Guarantee Credit
- You or your partner hold a current NHS (HS in Northern Ireland) tax credit exemption certificate
- You or your partner hold a valid HC2 certificate (health service charges certificate).

You may be entitled to some help with the cost of NHS dental treatment if you or your partner holds a valid HC3 certificate.

To apply for an HC2 or HC3 certificate, you will need to complete form HC1 - available from your Jobcentre Plus office or by calling 0845 850 1166 or 0845 610 1112. You may also be able to get one from your local hospital, dentist, optician or doctor.

In addition to these exemptions, the basic dental examination is free for everyone in Scotland, and for people aged 25 and under, or 60 and over in Wales.
If I am not exempt from the charges, how much do I pay for NHS treatment?

England and Wales
If you live in England or Wales, there are three standard charges, or 'bands', depending on the treatment you need. These are reviewed and adjusted every April:

Band 1 - including examination, diagnosis, X-rays, scale and polish: England £16.50, Wales £12.00

Band 2 - all necessary treatment covered by the Band 1 charge, plus additional treatment such as fillings, root canal treatment and extractions: England £45.60, Wales £39.00

Band 3 - all necessary treatment covered by the Band 1 and Band 2 charges plus more complex procedures such as crowns, dentures or bridges: England £198.00, Wales £177.00

(prices correct at March 2010)

If you need urgent care, you pay the Band 1 charge, whatever the treatment.

Scotland and Northern Ireland
If you live in Scotland or Northern Ireland, you will pay 80 per cent of the total cost of the treatment, up to a maximum of £384. Most treatment will cost far less than this.

Useful organisations and other information

NHS online and telephone advice
For help with finding your nearest dentist. You may not be able to tell if the building is accessible, so if in doubt call the surgery to ask.

England and Wales
Telephone 0845 4647
www.nhs.uk/servicedirectories (England)
www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices (Wales)

Scotland
Telephone 08454 24 24 24
www.nhs24.com

Northern Ireland
www.hscni.net
HM Revenue and Customs

To find out about your eligibility for tax credits
Helpline 0845 300 3900
Textphone 0845 300 3909
taxcredits.hmrc.gov.uk

Benefit Enquiry Line

For people with disabilities, their carers and representatives. Confidential advice and information on benefits and how to claim them. They can also send out an extensive range of leaflets and claim packs, and help you to complete a claim form over the phone.
Telephone 0800 88 22 00 (England, Wales and Scotland)
Telephone 0800 220 674 (Northern Ireland)
References


7. www.nhs.uk/conditions/oral-thrush---adults (Accessed 16.2.10)


10 www.dentalhealth.org.uk/faqs/browseleaflets.php (Accessed 16.2.10)


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