

Finding a Dentist for Your Loved One

People with disabilities often need help finding healthcare.



Sometimes the people we love need extra help. In the healthcare industry, they are called special healthcare needs (SHCN) patients. These special healthcare needs can be:¹

- Physical
- Sensory
- Emotional
- Developmental
- Mental
- Behavioral
- Cognitive

Patients may have learning trouble or issues with over-stimulation. They may have suffered a trauma or injury. Or they might have other limitations. Because of this, finding a dentist can be a challenge.¹

The links between oral health and overall health are long established. That's why finding the proper dental care for SHCN patients is so important.



How to Find a Dentist

Finding a SHCN dentist can take extra time. But we've made it easier for you. Visit [<link>](#) and enter your zip code.

Sometimes, though, your loved one may need a SHCN visit. This may be just a longer appointment. This helps the dentist address any issues that could take longer. Or it may be a pre-appointment visit to the dentist. At this visit, often called a "de-sensitization visit," the patient learns who will be caring for them. It can help those with emotional and sensory issues.³

Barriers to Care

More than 60 million people in the U.S. have special needs. That's one in four Americans. And many of these are severe.² What makes it so difficult for people with SHCN to find a dentist? Often, these are things we take for granted, like vision, hearing, and mobility. These can affect a person's ability to get care and maintain oral health.

- Mobility issues may impede movement needed for exams or treatment.
- Cognitive handicaps can make it hard to understand or remember the doctor's instructions.
- Developmental issues may make it harder to talk with the doctor and staff. It may also trigger behavior that some find disruptive.
- Mental illness may result in self-neglect or acting out.
- Sensory disorders (like some types of autism) may cause sensitivity to sights, sounds, and touch.

Some people cannot live alone. Others may need help getting out. Patients with Alzheimer's, Down Syndrome, and hearing loss fall into these groups.

Many SHCN patients have several barriers to care. These special needs are diverse and complex. Sometimes, providers may need special training and equipment. This is in addition to what is required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Because it can be hard to find the right dentist, the oral health of SHCN patients is usually worse than that of the general public.³

If you have loved ones with special needs, please reach out to help them find the right care. This includes the all-important visit to the dentist.

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1 <https://www.aapd.org/research/oral-health-policies--recommendations/management-of-dental-patients-with-special-health-care-needs/>, accessed November 2019.

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>, September 2019.

3 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/10/24/498558056/getting-dental-care-can-be-a-challenge-for-people-with-disabilities>, October 2016.

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