



Overcoming Oral Health Barriers for People With Disabilities

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The Need for Dental Care Among People with Disabilities

Disabilities can affect anyone at any time. In the United States, [one of every four adults](#) has some type of disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

People with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities often encounter difficulties getting the healthcare they need—including proper care for their mouth and teeth.

Oral health is important for everyone, whether or not they have disabilities. When we have a healthy mouth, we're more likely to keep our natural teeth longer, which makes the everyday tasks of chewing, swallowing, and speaking easier. Keeping our natural teeth means keeping our mouth's natural bone structure, which affects our natural facial structure. [When our natural teeth are gone](#), our other teeth can shift, creating problems for our smile, our oral functioning, and our self-esteem. (When necessary, prosthodontics can solve some of the problems losing natural teeth causes.)

In addition, a healthy mouth contributes to our overall health. When we don't or can't keep our mouth's natural bacteria at the right level through brushing and flossing, those bacteria can lead to infections like tooth decay and gum disease.

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Evidence suggests [poor oral health can also play a role in other diseases and conditions](#), including:

- Endocarditis (infection of the heart's inner lining)
- Cardiovascular disease (heart disease, clogged arteries, and strokes)
- Diabetes
- Pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses
- Pregnancy and birth complications (premature birth, low birth weight)

While everyone's good oral health is important, keeping the mouths of people with disabilities healthy is especially pressing.

For example, the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) identifies several oral health problems that tend to be [more prevalent among people with developmental disabilities](#) than among people without disabilities:

- Tooth decay
- Periodontal (gum) disease
- Malocclusion (improperly aligned teeth)
- Damaging oral habits (teeth grinding and clenching, mouth breathing, and others)
- Oral malformations
- Trauma and injury to the mouth and teeth



And writing in the [Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability](#), Nathan Wilson and colleagues state people with intellectual disability (ID) have “a higher prevalence and greater severity of periodontal diseases such as gingivitis and periodontitis, compared to people without ID. Further, the levels of untreated dental decay are consistently higher in this population, with several studies showing more missing and decayed teeth but less filled teeth in people with ID.”

[As the advocacy organization Families USA states](#), “Poor oral health can impede people’s ability to eat, interact socially, get a job, and feel well—adding to the difficulties people with disabilities already face in daily life.”

Common Obstacles to Dental Care for People with Disabilities

Given their demonstrated need for quality oral and dental healthcare, why do people with disabilities so often have trouble getting the needed treatment?

Several disabilities make oral self-care activities like brushing and flossing more challenging. The [NIDCR identifies multiple reasons](#), among them:

- Mental capabilities can affect a person's ability to follow self-care instructions.
- Visual impairments, hearing loss, and deafness can also be obstacles to learning and practicing oral self-care.
- Behavioral issues can interfere with and inhibit cooperation.
- Neuromuscular disorders can lead to persistently rigid or loose oral muscles, drooling, gagging, and swallowing problems.
- Seizures and uncontrolled body movements can complicate safe oral care.

Sometimes, simple assistance from caregivers or other individuals can overcome these obstacles to self-care. At other times, people with disabilities need the services of dental professionals.

Unfortunately, several barriers to professional care for this population too often remain.

1. Many Dentists Aren't Trained to Treat Patients With Disabilities.

Although several factors can contribute to people with disabilities not getting the dental care they need, the biggest obstacle is finding dental professionals able and willing to serve them.

[Only in late 2018](#) did the American Dental Association (ADA) revise its code of conduct to prohibit denying care to patients with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities. Now, if dental professionals can't accommodate patients with disabilities, they must refer those patients to someone who can.

But despite being qualified and experienced in routine dentistry, dentists aren't always trained in treating people with disabilities. For instance, the National Council on Disability (NCD) conducted a survey in 2017 in which [75% of dental students](#) reported receiving "little to no preparation in providing care" to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Fortunately, the Commission on Dental Accreditation approved new standards in 2019 requiring all dental schools in the U.S. to train their students in assessing and managing the treatment of patients with such disabilities. But this change, while welcome, cannot instantly make access to dental care easier.

As the NCD's attorney advisor [Amged Soliman told Disability Scoop](#): "People with disabilities, specifically intellectual and developmental disabilities, can't get dental care because dentists aren't trained to treat them. It's not fair they simply can't get dental care because nobody knows how to do it."

2. Many Dentists Won't Take Time to Understand and Accommodate Special Needs.

Frequently, dental professionals don't take the necessary time to understand their patients' special needs.

Cheryl Closs is the mother of Bella, a 15-year-old eighth grader who uses a wheelchair. Ms. Closs [told the New York Times](#) she'd taken her daughter to at least eight dentists and root-canal specialists who would not treat her. "They are quick to pull a child's teeth that is special needs," she said, instead of taking the time to find a way to save the teeth.

Similarly, some dental professionals are quick to use general anesthetic on patients whose special needs make tolerating standard treatment harder. General anesthetic or intravenous sedation may make the dentist's work easier, but it's not always the best choice for the patient, and is not without its risks.

3. Many Dentists' Facilities Can't Physically Accommodate Patients With Disabilities.

Even when dentists know how to treat people with disabilities, the lack of physical accommodations can become a barrier to treatment. In a 2020 survey conducted by the Oral Health Workforce Research Center, dentists who treated fewer people with special needs than other dentists cited [offices "not properly equipped" to accommodate](#) such patients as a major reason why.

A dentist who practices on the second floor of a building with narrow hallways and no elevator is going to have a difficult if not impossible time treating patients who cannot or prefer not to get out of a wheelchair.

4. Some Patients With Disabilities Fear Going To The Dentist.

Anxiety about dental visits isn't limited to people with disabilities, but it can be especially acute for some of them. For example, [research suggests](#) the higher the level of intellectual disability, the greater dental anxiety can be.

Dental fear is one reason many patients with disabilities haven't seen a dentist or hygienist in years. Some have not been to the dentist since aging out of pediatric dental care. And those who have may have had a negative, traumatic experience they are understandably not eager to risk repeating.

5. Patients with communication differences can have difficulty communicating new or worsened pain.

Disabilities can make it hard for people to report pain in their mouth and teeth. As a result, their caregivers may not know a trip to the dentist is in order, and the person's pain can go unaddressed and unresolved far longer than necessary. A "deficiency of self-advocacy" often "reduces the chances of timely interventions,"



write Jihyun Lee and Juhea Chang in [BMC Oral Health](#).

In some cases, they may not recognize behavioral changes that could signal the person for whom they care is experiencing oral pain. For example, [contributors to Healthy Debate](#), a Canadian healthcare journalism website, wrote about a man with autism who could not speak, and who “beat his ear so severely because of a dental infection that it is permanently deformed.”

People with disabilities are often dependent on others for access to healthcare generally. Communication difficulties can exacerbate this dependence, as well as caregivers’ tendencies to make oral care “take a back seat” to what they may perceive as more pressing health needs, as Saulo V. da Rosa and colleagues observed in the [International Journal of Dentistry](#).

Providing Dental Care Solutions to Patients with Special Needs at Penn Dental

In December 2020, we at Penn Dental Medicine (PDM) opened our [Care Center for Persons with Disabilities](#).

The Care Center defies the common assumption that patients with disabilities must always receive treatment in a hospital setting. The Center is a general dental environment providing the full range of dental services in ways that encourage and facilitate sustainable oral health.

Occupying approximately 3,500 square feet on the second floor of the School of Dental Medicine's Robert Schattner Center, the Center is specifically designed and staffed to provide comprehensive, compassionate, patient-centered oral health care to people aged 14 and older with a wide range of physical, intellectual, developmental, and acquired disabilities.

The Center provides comprehensive dental care for routine oral health care and prevention that focuses on delivery of dental treatment, including:

- Individualized risk assessment and minimally invasive treatment plans to prevent tooth decay
- Personalized oral health care and prevention plans, including diet modifications
- Hands-on education for caregivers in the delivery of oral hygiene
- In-house, Penn Dental specialists to whom patients can be referred when necessary

Under the close supervision of licensed faculty dentists, all of whom have extensive experience assessing and providing treatment to patients with special healthcare needs, our predoctoral and postdoctoral students provide high quality, customized care that overcomes the obstacles these patients too often encounter.

- ✓ **Each of our student dentists rotates through the Center as part of their training.** We're ensuring the next generation of dental professionals knows how to care for people with disabilities.
- ✓ **We take the necessary time to understand our patients' unique circumstances and provide the accommodations they need.** Before a patient's first visit, we perform a detailed pre-screening to accurately determine the scope of services needed. We work closely with patients and those caring for them to establish a medical history, and to communicate information to ensure the appointment will go smoothly.
- ✓ **We do not sedate our patients with general anesthetic.** Unlike some dentists who treat people with disabilities, we don't put patients under general anesthetic to make our work easier or faster. Instead, we find ways to make patients' experiences less frightening and more comfortable while they're awake, instead of denying them the chance to experience treatment at all. Allowing them to experience their treatment can decrease resistance to future dental treatment and increase the likelihood it becomes part of their routine. If and when the need for relaxation arises, we use nitrous oxide inhalation analgesia, which proves effective for 75%-80% of patients with disabilities.

✓ **The Center's Personalized Care Suite features several accommodations many dentists' offices don't or can't provide.**

The Suite is the Center's clinical care area. In it, we adapt the care environment to each patient's needs. The Care Suite features, among other accommodations:

- Elevators and corridors wide enough for two wheelchairs



- A six-chair open bay with privacy partitions

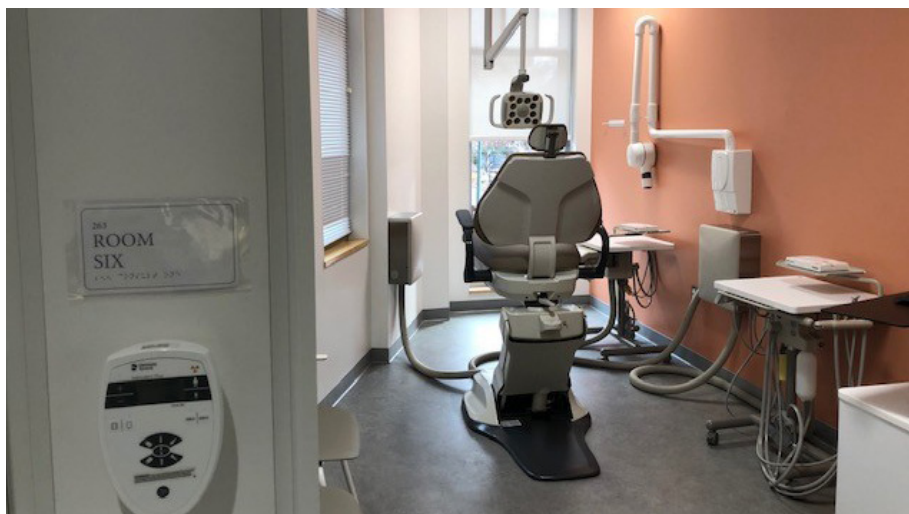




- Six closed operatories with adjustable lighting and blackout shades for patients needing or desiring more privacy
- A wheelchair lift room so patients may sit in their wheelchairs rather than a dental chair



- Hydraulic-operated hover chair rooms for patients who aren't ambulatory





- A designated “quiet room” with low lighting and a carpeted floor for patients who need or want protection against sensory overstimulation



- Digital radiology capability in each chair, as well as a radiology room using cone-beam imaging technology with patients who can't tolerate conventional X-ray imaging

✓ **Our student dentists learn and use patient-centered techniques proven to reduce anxiety around dental treatments.**

They adopt a trauma-informed approach to avoid triggering patients.

✓ **We work closely with patients and caregivers to make the experience a positive one, and to position patients for ongoing oral health.** As part of our pre-appointment discussions with patients and/or their caregivers, we can help caregivers recognize non-verbal and other ways people with disabilities communicate their oral pain. We also teach patients and caregivers skills for promoting easier, more effective oral hygiene at home.

We show exactly what must be done, and exactly how to do it. Very often, caregivers tell us they can easily transfer the skills we teach to other aspects of caregiving, which results in better overall health outcomes.

✓ **Our patients and their caregivers have peace of mind knowing we provide emergency services.** We offer more than pre-scheduled appointments. In the event of a dental emergency, we can provide the necessary care quickly and with the same level of customized accommodations.

The Care Center and its Personalized Care Suite are actively making quality dental care more accessible to people with disabilities.

And through the Care Center's [Colgate Innovation Laboratory](#), patients may, with their consent, participate in initiatives to develop new products that empower people with disabilities to better manage their own oral health.

By receiving treatment at the Penn Dental Medicine Care Center for Persons with Disabilities, patients are not only improving their own oral health—they're making a contribution to expanded access to oral healthcare for all persons with disabilities.

What to Expect When You Visit the Care Center

All patients work with a care team that includes student dentists, dental hygienists, registered dietitians, and dental faculty members skilled at delivering care to patients with all types of needs.

In addition, the Center staff includes a nurse practitioner who works with our dental students to ensure they fully understand the medical complexity of each patient's situation, and can provide the most appropriate treatment possible.

In addition, each patient is assigned an oral health navigator. Navigators are PDM staff members who are specially trained to connect patients with services, and to facilitate scheduling and follow-ups with patients. Most dental offices don't provide this level of personal assistance.

Your oral health navigator will work with you on any logistical or other needs you have connected with your visit to the Care Center, including:

- Arranging transportation
- Physically entering the Care Center
- Getting booked into the correct room

Becoming a PDM Care Center Patient

The first step in becoming a patient is to schedule an initial examination by calling 215-898-8180 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. You will be asked several questions to ensure that an appointment is given in the clinical care area best suited to your needs.

Once the appointment is made, you may receive a follow-up call to collect further information and some initial health history, and to find out about any special accommodations needed to make the first visit go as smoothly as possible.

When new patients are accepted, they are assigned to a student doctor. The student doctor, under faculty supervision, will review the patient's medical history, and complete a dental examination with radiographs (X-rays) as needed. The information collected will be used to develop a personalized treatment plan. Once the treatment plan is approved by faculty and signed by the patient/caregiver, a second appointment will be scheduled to begin the treatment itself.

APPOINTMENTS:

Monday–Friday — 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., 215-898-8180

Please be aware that since you are being treated in a dental school, your appointments may be longer than if you were treated in a non-educational setting.

PARKING:

There is a patient drop-off area in front of the Robert Schattner Center, the main entrance to Penn Dental Medicine on 40th Street between Locust and Spruce

Streets. There is discounted parking available (\$11 for the first 5 hours and a \$15 daily rate after 5 hours) at the Acme parking garage, located at 40th and Walnut Streets. Patients/caregivers will be asked at check-out if they parked in this lot and will receive a discount voucher.

PAYMENTS:

Payment is due in full at the time of service and is accepted in the form of personal checks, money orders, credit/debit cards, or CareCredit. Private insurance and Medicaid are also accepted. Penn Dental Medicine reserves the right to suspend treatment for accounts with past due balances.

CareCredit: Payment financing is available through CareCredit. Penn Dental Medicine participates with the 24-, 36-, 48-, and 60-month fixed rate installment programs as well as the 6-month no interest if paid in full program.

Dental Insurance: Penn Dental Medicine accepts direct payments from most dental insurance plans.

Medicaid: Penn Dental Medicine participates in Medicaid. Patients covered by Medicaid should inform Penn Dental Medicine when admitted. Coverage is based upon plan eligibility.

Treatment Services Requiring Pre-payment: For services requiring laboratory work (e.g. crowns, bridges, dentures), two thirds of the charge is due prior to submitting the case to the dental laboratory, and the balance is due at the time of insertion. For implant services and periodontal surgical procedures, prepayment must be made in full before treatment.

Schedule Your Visit to the PDM Care Center Today

The Care Center for Persons with Disabilities and the Personalized Care Suite at Penn Dental Medicine make quality, comprehensive dental and oral health care more accessible than ever to adults with special needs in Philadelphia and the greater Philadelphia region.

It's a state-of-the-art facility expressly designed to accommodate people with a wide range of disabilities, staffed by experts who provide customized, patient-centered care.

Don't let obstacles continue to keep you or the adult for whom you care from receiving needed attention and treatment. We at PDM are here to help you establish and maintain the best oral health possible.

[Schedule your appointment at Penn Dental Medicine](#) online today, or call us at 215-898-8180.