## A Veteran's Story on Staying Healthy

Joe Smith is a healthy, fit 78 year old Navy Veteran. He was admitted to the hospital for surgery. The last thing on his mind was brushing his teeth. Three days after entering the hospital, he developed a cough. He was shocked to hear he had pneumonia. What he expected to be a 2-3 day hospital stay lasted 2 weeks. He missed his grandson's playoff game and his wife's home cooking. Since he learned about the importance of tooth brushing and denture cleaning in preventing pneumonia, he is telling all his friends and family.



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This handout is for patients at VHA medical facilities. It explains the association between oral care and the prevention of hospital acquired pneumonia.

# BRUSH YOUR TEETH
# TO PREVENT PNEUMONIA
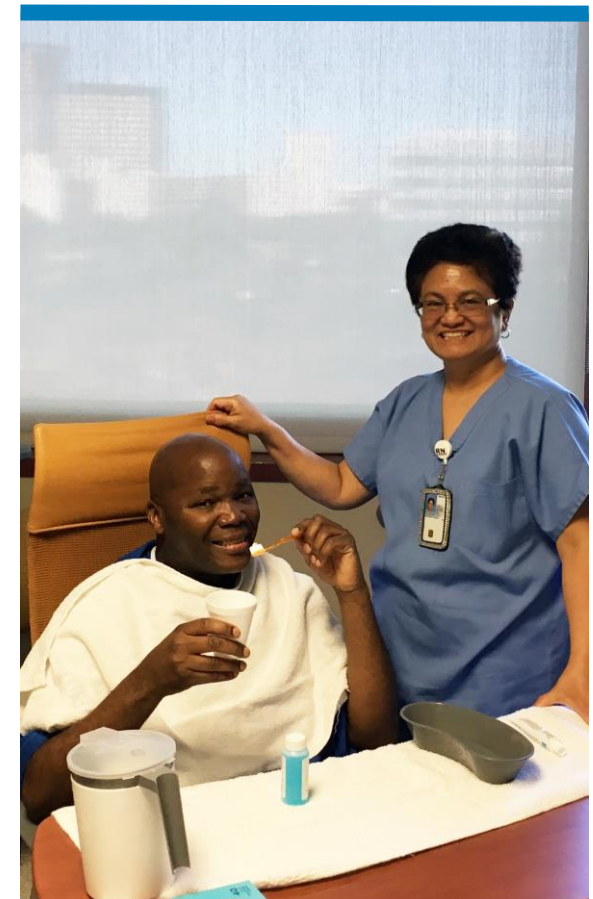
## Did you know that brushing your teeth can prevent many health problems including pneumonia?

Oral health is an important part of your overall health. In your own mouth you may have noticed that rough, fuzzy, or unclean feeling if you don't brush your teeth. This is from plaque – a sticky film that builds up on the surfaces of your teeth and contains billions of germs. The germs found in plaque feed on the sugar in foods you eat.

Germs in your mouth can make your gums red, swollen, and infected. Germs can also cause tooth decay (cavities), gum disease, and even pneumonia.

The germs in your mouth multiply five times every 24 hours and are frequently swallowed into your lungs during sleep. When you swallow these germs into your lungs, they can cause pneumonia. **Regular tooth brushing lowers the number of germs in your mouth and the risk of developing pneumonia by 40-60%.**

## What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a serious infection of the lungs, in which oxygen has trouble reaching your blood, causing your body's cells to not work properly. A person with pneumonia might find it harder to breathe, especially if the pneumonia affects both lungs. The most common cause of pneumonia is bacteria (germs).

Most patients with pneumonia experience fever, chills, cough, chest pain, and shortness of breath. Some patients also experience headache, low energy, loss of appetite, and confusion.

Patients who develop pneumonia often have to stay in the hospital 10-14 days longer. Additionally, many Veterans who develop pneumonia while in the hospital are discharged to a long-term facility for additional care.

If you have any questions or concerns about pneumonia and how brushing your teeth can help, consult your health care team.

## DID YOU KNOW?

During sleep, mouth germs are frequently **swallowed into the lungs** and can cause pneumonia

Brushing your teeth **lowers your chances** of developing hospital acquired pneumonia by 40-60%

Brushing your teeth **at least twice a day** will keep you healthier and help you leave the hospital sooner by preventing pneumonia

## What can you do to prevent pneumonia?

**Brushing your teeth at least twice a day** – after meals and before bedtime – will keep you healthier and reduce your chances of developing pneumonia. This will also help you leave the hospital sooner.

Be sure to brush your teeth **gently and thoroughly** to remove plaque and germs, trying not to miss any areas as you brush. Your nurse can help you with this! Keep in mind **that it's not how hard you brush that matters**.

Be sure to continue brushing your teeth twice a day once you are at home. Use a toothbrush that is soft with flexible bristles. Soft bristles can flex and are gentle on delicate gum tissue surrounding the teeth. Use a small amount of fluoride toothpaste, about the size of a pea. If you are unable to use toothpaste, we recommend brushing your teeth with tap water alone.

A worn-out toothbrush does not remove plaque effectively. **Toothbrushes should be replaced about every 3 months** or sooner, before bristles look bent, worn, or flared.