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NELSON MANDELA DAY 2026: GIVING SMILES, CHANGING LIVES THROUGH BETTER ORAL HEALTH



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67 Minutes that Can Transform a Smile, and a Life

Every year on 18 July, South Africans unite to honour Nelson Mandela's extraordinary legacy by dedicating 67 minutes of service, symbolising the 67 years he devoted to fighting for justice, equality and human dignity. While many Mandela Day initiatives focus on food security, education and clothing drives, one critical aspect of health is often overlooked, oral health. Yet a healthy smile is far more than an attractive appearance. It enables children to learn without pain, adults to work with confidence, and families to enjoy better overall health. This Mandela Day, we have an opportunity to make a lasting difference by improving access to oral healthcare for vulnerable communities.

The Hidden Burden of Poor Oral Health

The gold standard for maintaining oral health remains brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste using a soft toothbrush, combined with regular dental check-ups and a balanced diet low in sugar. However, many South Africans face financial barriers that limit access to these basic necessities.

Where conventional oral hygiene products are unavailable, several practical alternatives may provide temporary support:

A clean cloth

A clean, damp cloth wrapped around a finger can be used to gently remove plaque and food debris, particularly for infants, young children, frail older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Traditional chewing sticks

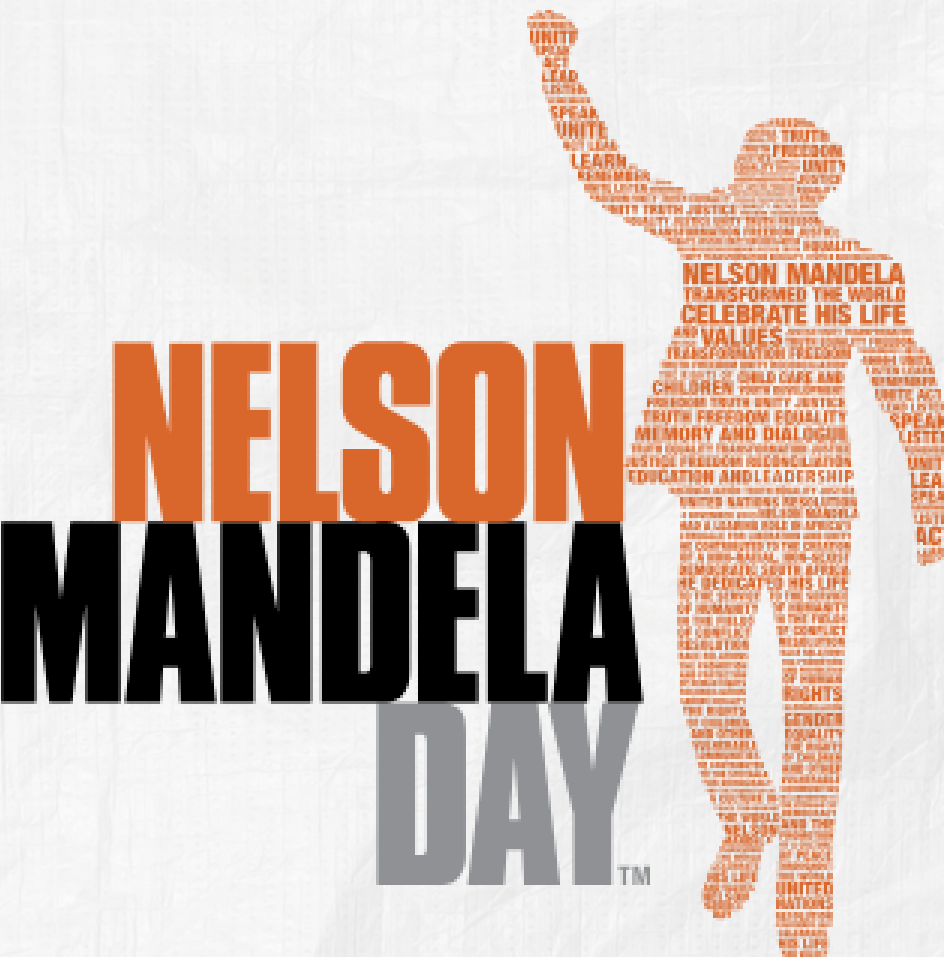
Certain indigenous chewing sticks have been used safely for generations in various African communities. When sourced from appropriate plant species and used correctly, they can assist with mechanical plaque removal. However, they should complement, not replace, the benefits of fluoride toothpaste.

Warm saltwater rinses

Saltwater rinses may help soothe inflamed gums, reduce bacterial load and support healing following minor oral irritation or dental procedures.

Healthy dietary habits

Reducing sugary snacks and sweetened beverages remains one of the most effective ways to prevent tooth decay. Drinking fluoridated water where available and choosing healthier food options also contribute significantly to better oral health. Although these alternatives offer some benefit, expanding access to affordable toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste remains the most effective long-term public health strategy.



Every Toothbrush Donated Can Change a Life

One of the simplest yet most impactful Mandela Day contributions is donating oral hygiene products. Communities, schools, churches, businesses and healthcare organisations can collect and distribute:

- New toothbrushes
- Fluoride toothpaste
- Dental floss
- Interdental brushes
- Children's oral health kits
- Oral health educational pamphlets
- Reusable hygiene bags.

For many families, these basic items represent the difference between maintaining healthy teeth and living with preventable oral disease.

Businesses Can Multiply Their Impact

Corporate South Africa has a unique opportunity to extend the spirit of Mandela Day beyond a single day of service.

Organisations can support sustainable oral health initiatives by:

- Sponsoring school toothbrushing programmes
- Funding preventive oral health education campaigns
- Supporting mobile dental clinics serving rural and underserved communities
- Partnering with healthcare professionals to provide community oral health screenings
- Donating oral hygiene supplies to schools, orphanages and community centres.

Such initiatives contribute not only to healthier communities but also to improved educational outcomes and long-term healthcare cost savings.

Supporting Organisations Making a Difference

Several organisations continue to improve access to oral healthcare and broader health services across South Africa.

These include:

- Smile Foundation, which supports reconstructive facial and oral surgery while improving access to specialised healthcare services.
- Dental Wellness Trust, which focuses on preventing childhood tooth decay through education, supervised toothbrushing programmes and community outreach.
- Gift of the Givers Foundation, which regularly provides healthcare outreach, humanitarian relief and essential services to vulnerable communities.

Healthcare professionals, managed care organisations, universities and private dental practices also conduct outreach programmes that deliver preventive and primary oral healthcare to schools and underserved communities. Supporting these initiatives through volunteering, sponsorship or donations can significantly expand their reach.

Your 67 Minutes Can Leave a Lasting Legacy

Nelson Mandela once reminded us that: "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others."

This Mandela Day, consider how your 67 minutes can help create healthier smiles. Volunteer at a school. Educate children about brushing their teeth. Donate oral hygiene products. Support a mobile dental outreach programme.

Partner with organisations working to improve access to oral healthcare. Small acts of kindness can prevent pain, restore dignity and improve lives for years to come. Because good oral health should never be a privilege, it should be a right enjoyed by every South African. This Nelson Mandela Day, let us honour Madiba's legacy by giving more than our time. Let us give confidence. Let us give health. Let us give smiles that can change lives.

References

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