

Oral Health Tips

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Dental Emergencies: Do You Know What to Do?

Many people at some point in their life have some sort of dental trauma or emergency. Knowing some basic precautionary measures as well as how to act quickly in an emergency could make the difference between losing and keeping your tooth.

What is a Dental Emergency?

Any injury to the teeth or gums can be serious. Injury can damage nerves or blood vessels, and there is also a risk of getting an infection, which, if left untreated, could become life threatening. Getting injured teeth repaired and treated quickly is the best thing to do. Even if there is little pain, any structural damage to a tooth — from a sports injury, for example — should be considered an emergency.

When to Seek Immediate Dental Care

See a dentist immediately in the following situations:

- **Severe pain:** Common causes for severe pain include injury, infection, broken teeth, abscess or pain following dental procedures.
- **Abscesses:** Likely caused by the death of a nerve inside the tooth or a gum infection. Untreated, an abscess could be life threatening. Antibiotics/pain killers may be prescribed.
- **Displaced teeth:** If a tooth is pushed inward or outward, reposition to normal alignment with light finger pressure. Do not force. Use a moist cloth or gauze to hold tooth in place. See a dentist within 30 minutes of injury.
- **Broken or fractured teeth:** Minor fractures may be smoothed by a dentist using a sandpaper disc. Moderate to severe fractures may require more extensive treatment.

- **Injuries to soft tissues:** Tears, cuts or punctures inside the cheeks, lips or tongue. Clean and treat immediately in an urgent care center or emergency department. For tongue laceration, pull tongue forward; apply pressure to area with clean gauze.

Other Urgent Dental Matters

- **Toothache Trauma:** Toothache or tooth pain is caused when the nerve root of a tooth is irritated. It can be very painful if not properly treated. Rinse mouth with warm water to clean it. Apply a cold compress. Use floss to remove any food trapped between teeth. Apply cold compress. Do not put heat or aspirin on the aching area. Avoid very cold or hot foods because they may make the pain worse. Call your dental office to schedule a dental appointment.
- **Broken or lost filling:** If causing pain, take an over-the-counter pain medication until you can see your dentist. Don't delay. Brush and floss to remove impacted foods; eat soft foods.
- **Canker sores:** If a sore doesn't heal within 10 days, see a dentist. Don't put aspirin on the canker sore. A pharmacist can recommend a topical anesthetic to reduce discomfort.

continued on next page



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continued from previous page

First Aid for Knocked-Out Teeth

An estimated 1 to 3 million permanent teeth are knocked-out annually in the U.S. If appropriate emergency procedures are followed and you bring the tooth to a dentist — ideally 30 minutes, but even within up to an hour or more — it may be possible to save the tooth.

- Find and pick up the tooth by the enamel or top portion of the tooth to prevent damage to the root.
- Handle the tooth as little as possible and do not touch the root surface.
- If dirty, gently rinse with water, but do not scrub or use soap or chemicals.
- If possible, replace the tooth into the socket immediately and hold in place with fingers or by gently biting down on it.
- If the tooth cannot be replaced in the socket, keep it moist at all times and do not wrap in a tissue or cloth.
- Transport the tooth to a dentist in an emergency tooth preservation kit, milk, mouth (next to cheek), or if none of these is practical, in clean water with a pinch of salt if possible.
- Get to the dentist as soon as possible. If replanted by a dentist within 15-30 minutes, there is a 90 percent chance the tooth will be retained for life.
- For baby or primary teeth, do not try to place it back into the socket. This could damage the formation of the permanent tooth bud. Seek immediate advice from a dentist.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org; American Association of Endodontists: www.aae.org; Colgate: www.colgate.com; Sports Dentistry www.sportsdentistry.com