

Dental SOS

Lost a filling, broken a tooth, or suffering some other kind of dental emergency? An HCF expert explains what to do for the best possible result.

Most of us have got the message that correct tooth brushing, daily flossing and regular visits to the dentist are the best way to keep our teeth and gums healthy. Follow that regimen, says Dr Ian Jacobi, Director of Dental Services at HCF, and you should be fine.

However, very occasionally - usually when you least expect it - some dental emergency crops up. With almost all emergencies, the best thing to do, says Ian Jacobi, "is to get dental care as quickly as possible. Don't expect to get the definitive final treatment immediately - you may need to see your dentist for follow-up visits".

Looking after your health is a team effort - in the case of dental emergencies, there are certainly things you can do, to improve your chances of successful treatment, before you get to the dentist.

Pain

"Pain can come from a huge variety of sources," says Dr Jacobi, and that includes an infected nerve, leaking filling, broken or loose tooth, temporomandibular joint problem (TMJ) or denture problems. "You'll need to contact your dentist, and depending on the nature of the pain and its cause, your dentist will either bring you in as an emergency or, if the pain isn't severe, will arrange for a later appointment."

In the meantime, Dr Jacobi recommends taking low level non-codeine medication or, if the pain is more severe, codeine-containing medication. If it's TMJ, you should take something with an anti-inflammatory component to it, such as ibuprofen. Are these available over the counter or do you need a prescription?

A broken tooth

Again, says Ian Jacobi, you should seek attention as quickly as possible. "Keep the area clean, with very gentle brushing unless that causes further pain. Minimise hard food intake, and avoid the sort of food that breaks down easily and gets lodged in the painful area."

A lost filling

This is another case of keeping the area clean and arranging a dental appointment as soon as possible. Temporary filling material may be available at the chemist but, says Dr Jacobi, "you're much better off not playing around with it yourself". The best plan, in an emergency, is to have a temporary filling put in by your dentist before scheduling an appointment for a more permanent solution to the problem.

A sporting accident

Playing football, and all sorts of other sports, can be hazardous to your teeth. If one gets knocked out, do what you can to retrieve it. "Only pick it up by its crown – the part you normally see in the mouth – not by the roots, and get to the dentist as quickly as possible," says Dr Jacobi.

"Put it in some milk or bottled water, wrap it very loosely in plastic wrap, or try to put it back into the socket, which is the best way to transport it."

Handle it as little as possible, and definitely **don't** rinse it under running tap water. If your dentist isn't available, go to the nearest hospital with an emergency department, where you'll find dentists or oral surgeons on call to help you. If the tooth is broken or displaced, rather than knocked out completely, "don't touch it or push it to see how loose it is, otherwise it might come out altogether. Get help as quickly as possible."

If, along with tooth damage, you have trouble closing your mouth, you may have a fractured or dislocated jaw – in that case, head straight for the emergency department of the nearest hospital.

Missing Crown

"If the crown's come off completely, the best thing to do is contact the dentist, explain the situation and get some advice on what to do," says Dr Jacobi. "Don't put the crown back on – you might put it on the wrong way and cause damage, or think it's secure and then later swallow or inhale it."

Wrap the crown loosely in plastic wrap or a tissue – the less you touch it, the less likelihood of further damage or contamination by germs.

Facial Swelling

You wake up to find your face has blown up like a balloon for no apparent reason and doesn't hurt in the slightest – what's the best thing to do? "This requires urgent care."

It's usually a sign of some sort of infection, so ring your dentist for an immediate appointment or, if it's badly swollen, go along to the emergency department at your nearest hospital to have it checked out.

Bleeding

Bleeding from the gums can be a sign of periodontal disease or some underlying medical problem and needs to be investigated as soon as possible, especially if the bleeding is severe. If you've had a tooth extracted recently and can't stop the bleeding, seek professional help.

"Contact the dentist or surgeon who did the extraction or go to hospital," says Dr Jacobi.

In the meantime, fold a clean handkerchief into a wad, put it onto the affected area and bite down on it with constant pressure.