Dental Pain and Emergencies: What You Need to Know

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One out of every four people experiences a dental emergency at some point in their lives. Whether it's pain that keeps you up at night or a tooth knocked out while playing sports, dental emergencies require prompt treatment by a dentist. But when is a dental emergency a true emergency, and when does it necessitate simply the next available appointment with your dentist? Here are some ways to distinguish between true emergencies and simple situations that require a consultation with your dentist.

When Is It a Dental Emergency?

There are some times when it’s obvious you need an emergency dentist appointment. A hockey player receiving a blow to the face and experiencing jaw pain should go straight to the emergency room. A spill from a bicycle that knocks a tooth out requires immediate treatment by a dentist in order to try to save the tooth. Anytime a tooth is cracked, broken, or knocked completely out of the socket, it's a true emergency and you need to see the dentist right away.

Here are some common reasons for an emergency dental visit. Each is indeed an emergency and requires prompt treatment:

- Knocked out tooth
- Fractured tooth
- Toothache, especially a toothache that worsens when you lay down at night or over time
- Abscess or dental infection
- Broken denture or partial
- Loose tooth
- Wisdom teeth pain
- Lost crown or cap
- Lost filling
- Dry socket

Anytime dental pain is accompanied by fever or swelling, contact your dentist immediately. These are signs of a dental infection. Dental infections are serious infections that can spread to other parts of your body. You will need to see your dentist immediately.

Pain Is Your Body’s First Warning System

Pain is your body’s way of telling you that something is wrong. Think of it like your body’s first warning system. Your teeth are no different. Anytime you feel pain in your teeth or jaw, it’s time to make an appointment with your dentist. Only a dentist can distinguish among the many possible causes of tooth or jaw pain, diagnose the problem, and offer treatment options to get you out of pain, fast.
Pain Relief Until You Can Get to the Dentist

If you have a toothache, there are a few steps you can take for pain relief until you can see the dentist. Try taking an over the counter non-steroid anti-inflammatory pain relief medication as allowed by your doctor. Don't take aspirin, which can exacerbate bleeding. Remember, this is just to keep the pain at bay until your dental appointment. Pain relief medication masks pain but doesn't treat the source of it. Your dentist needs to evaluate and treat the source of the problem so that you get permanent pain relief.

A warm salt water rinse made from one teaspoon of table salt mixed into one cup of warm salt water and swished gently around the mouth can ease the pain from an infection or a cavity. Another simple technique is to use an ice pack or cold compress applied to your cheek on the area that hurts. Use it for only 20 minutes, and then remove it and let the area warm up for 20 minutes.

Afraid of the Dentist? Sedation Dentistry May Help

Many people delay making an appointment with the dentist even when they're in pain because they suffer from dental phobias or fears. If you're afraid of going to the dentist to the extent that you'd rather suffer from dental pain than make an appointment, you're probably one of the millions of people suffering from dental phobia. Consider finding a sedation dentist to help you get the treatment you need. During sedation dentistry, IV sedation is used to keep you sleepy and comfortable while the dentist completes your treatment. It's smart to find a sedation dentist who works with a certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA). A CRNA monitors your sedation levels and vital signs during the treatment so that the dentist can focus on completing your dental treatment. The dentist's attention isn't divided between dentistry and monitoring your vital signs; he can focus solely on your treatment.

Whether you have a serious emergency such as a cracked tooth or dental infection or are experiencing temporary dental pain, be sure to make an appointment with your dentist. Only by correcting the cause of the problem can your dentist relieve dental pain and contribute to your overall good health.

About the Author

Dr. Scott Shamblott, D.D.S., F.A.G.D., F.D.O.C.S., is a Hopkins, Minnesota area family dentist and the owner of Shamblott Family Dentistry. Dr. Shamblott was awarded his DDS degree with high distinction from the University of Minnesota, and has advanced training in conscious sedation, IV sedation, and many other fields. Many dentists refer dental phobic patients to Dr. Shamblott, knowing that his kind, professional demeanor will help fearful patients feel at ease and receive the dental treatment they need. Dr. Shamblott welcomes patients to his Minneapolis-area practice from throughout the Twin Cities and Western Wisconsin and offers a wide range of family dental services including emergency dentistry, children's dentistry, general and family dentistry, extractions, root canal treatments, cosmetic dentistry, orthodontics, cosmetic braces and more. Visit www.shamblottfamilydentistry.com to learn more or to make an appointment.