Why Does a Cracked Tooth Hurt and What Helps? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/cracked-tooth-hurt/

Details:

A cracked tooth hurts because the crack lets the pieces of the tooth flex when you bite, and the nerve inside the tooth reacts to that movement. When you release the bite, the pieces spring back together, and that sudden change is often felt as a sharp pain. This is commonly called cracked tooth syndrome. At Core Dental our dentists examine the tooth, test your bite and explain suitable treatment. Early assessment can help protect the tooth.

What is cracked tooth syndrome?

Cracked tooth syndrome is the term used when a tooth has a crack but no part of the tooth has actually broken off. Because nothing has visibly chipped away, the tooth can look normal in the mirror and may not show clearly on an X-ray. It is often associated with toothache, particularly when chewing, and it can be confusing to diagnose at home.

The crack usually affects the crown of the tooth, which is the visible part you see when you smile. In more severe cases the crack can extend towards or into the root. How far a crack reaches is one of the main things your dentist works out, because it influences which treatments are suitable.

Why does a cracked tooth hurt most when you release your bite?

Many people describe a sharp pain that is not worst while biting down, but just as they let go. This is sometimes called rebound pain. Here is the general explanation:

When you bite, pressure pushes the cracked segments of the tooth slightly apart.

That movement changes the space around the nerves inside the tooth.

When you release the bite, the segments close up again quickly, and the pressure on the nerve changes suddenly.

That fast change is what produces the characteristic flash of discomfort.

Not everyone feels pain in exactly this way. Symptoms vary from person to person and from tooth to tooth.

How does exposed pulp add to the pain?

At the centre of each tooth is the dental pulp, which is the living part containing connective tissue, blood vessels and nerves. A crack can sometimes reach the pulp or allow bacteria and temperature changes to reach it. When the pulp is exposed or irritated, it can become sensitive and painful, and it may become inflamed or infected. If that happens, root canal treatment may be one of the options your dentist discusses with you.

What symptoms are linked with a cracked tooth?

Symptoms vary, and a cracked tooth does not always cause every one of them. They may include:

pain when biting down or chewing

pain or sensitivity with cold, hot or sugary food and drink

pain that comes and goes without an obvious trigger

sensitivity to temperature that lingers

in more advanced cases, swelling in the gum or face

These symptoms can also point to other dental problems, such as decay, a loose filling or gum disease, so it is worth having the tooth looked at properly. You can read more in our article on the main symptoms and signs of toothache .

What are the treatment options for a cracked tooth?

If you have tooth pain, we suggest seeing a dentist promptly so the cause can be assessed. In the case of cracked tooth syndrome, your dentist will usually check your bite and use a bite test to help confirm the diagnosis. Treatment is generally aimed at limiting movement of the cracked sections, which helps protect the tooth and reduces the chance of the crack extending. Depending on your situation, options may include:

A core build-up or filling: to support the structure of the tooth.

A dental crown: a cover that holds the tooth together and shares biting forces. You can read about dental crowns and about what a dental crown is .

Root canal treatment: where the pulp has become infected or irreversibly inflamed. See our guide to root canal therapy .

Extraction: in severe cases, for example where the crack extends below the gum line or into the root, removing the tooth may be more practical than trying to keep it. We would then talk to you about ways to replace a missing tooth .

Your dentist will recommend what is suitable after examining the tooth, and treatment time, costs and risks vary. For more detail, see how a cracked tooth is treated .

Why should you not wait if you suspect a cracked tooth?

By the time you notice toothache, sensitivity to hot or cold, or swelling, the problem has often been present for some time. Acting early gives a good opportunity to keep the tooth, and delay can allow a crack to extend or bacteria to reach the pulp. If you feel a sharp pain on biting, or think you have damaged a tooth, please call us.

Call 000 or go to a hospital emergency department if you have difficulty breathing, significant swelling of the jaw, difficulty swallowing, or you cannot eat or drink. For tooth pain without these signs, contact us as soon as you can. We keep emergency appointments available where possible.

What can you do until you see a dentist?

While you arrange an appointment, you may find it helps to chew on the other side of your mouth, avoid very hot, cold or hard foods, and keep the area clean with gentle brushing. Over-the-counter pain relief used as directed on the packaging may help for a short time, but it does not treat the cause. Please do not try to repair a cracked tooth yourself.

If a piece has broken off, keep it — and keep it wet

A chipped or cracked tooth often comes with a fragment, and what happens to that fragment in the first few minutes is worth knowing before it happens rather than after.

The Victorian Department of Health: "if part of the tooth is broken off and is intact, store it in milk or the saliva of the person with the broken tooth and seal it in a container or plastic wrap, and see an oral health professional as soon as possible."

Milk or saliva, sealed, not dry and not in a pocket. The same page rules water out for storing a knocked-out tooth, and the sensible reading for a fragment is the same: keep it in milk if you can, saliva if you cannot.

The second published point is the one that most often costs people a tooth, because it runs against instinct: "teeth that have been chipped or cracked may or may not be painful. Either way, you should see an oral health professional as soon as possible because early repair can improve the survival of a damaged tooth."

Pain is not the test. A crack that does not hurt is not a crack that can wait — the Department ties early repair to the tooth's survival, not to the level of discomfort. If your tooth chipped last month and settled down, that is still worth an appointment.

Note what the Department does not say. It gives no deadline, no number of hours and no survival percentage for a damaged tooth. "As soon as possible" is the whole of its timing advice, and we will not convert that into a figure — not least because believing a window has closed is a reason people stop seeking care.

If there is bleeding you cannot control, difficulty breathing or swallowing, or a serious facial injury, call 000. Otherwise call us on 13 13 16, bring the fragment if you have it, and we will arrange an examination.

Source: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental injuries — Knocked out, chipped or cracked teeth, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (page reviewed 4 August 2026; accessed 4 November 2026).

Two causes worth ruling out: grinding, and an unprotected mouth in sport

A cracked tooth is an event, but it usually has a history. Two of the published contributors are worth checking, because both are addressable and both are easy to miss.

Grinding. A "cracked tooth" appears twice on the Department of Health's teeth-grinding page — once among the symptoms of bruxism and again among the problems it causes, alongside "more wear and tear on the teeth than is normal" and "broken teeth or broken restorations (for example, fillings)".

So a cracked tooth in someone who grinds is not bad luck, and repairing the tooth without addressing the grinding leaves the cause running. The Department's position on the appliance is honest about its limits — "in most cases, a bite splint will only help with the symptoms and will not stop you from grinding altogether" — but protecting the teeth is precisely what it is for, and a repaired tooth is worth protecting. It also lists "ruling out other types of tooth wear such as erosion" as part of assessing grinding, which matters here: acid erosion weakens teeth too and is a different problem with a different fix.

The grinding symptoms to mention if any apply to you: aching teeth or a stiff face and temples just after waking, stiffness in the jaws during breakfast, teeth sensitive to hot, cold or sweetness, indentations on the tongue, or raised tissue inside the cheek from biting.

Sport, including training. The Department's prevention advice is specific and broader than most people assume: "always wear a mouthguard for all sports and training where there is a risk of mouth injury, such as football, rugby, soccer, basketball, netball, water polo or hockey."

Two details in that sentence do work. It says training , not just games — and a great many injuries happen at training, where people are least likely to bother. And its list includes netball, basketball and

water polo, which are not contact sports in the usual sense but are on the list anyway.

On the type of guard, the Department states that "an oral health professional can make you a professionally fitted mouthguard to give your teeth the best protection". We make custom-fitted mouthguards, and the honest reason to prefer one over a boil-and-bite is fit rather than anything more dramatic.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Teeth grinding betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 17 October 2025) and Dental injuries — Knocked out, chipped or cracked teeth betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026). Both accessed 4 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Can a cracked tooth heal by itself?

No. Unlike a broken bone, tooth enamel and dentine do not repair themselves, so a crack generally stays and can spread with chewing forces. Your dentist can suggest ways to protect the tooth, such as a crown, and will explain what is suitable for you.

Why is a cracked tooth hard to see on an X-ray?

A fine crack often does not show on an X-ray, especially when it runs in line with the beam. Dentists usually combine your symptoms, a close visual check, a bite test and sometimes magnification or imaging to reach a diagnosis.

Is a cracked tooth a dental emergency?

It can be. Severe pain, swelling or a tooth that has broken apart should be seen promptly. For milder symptoms, we still suggest an early appointment. Call us on 13 13 16, and use 000 if you have breathing or swallowing difficulty or serious facial swelling.

What causes teeth to crack?

Common contributors include biting on hard foods, grinding or clenching, large old fillings that weaken the tooth, sudden temperature changes and injury. Some people are more prone than others. Your dentist can talk with you about risk factors and about protecting your teeth, for example with a splint.

Will I need a crown for a cracked tooth?

Not always. Some cracks can be managed with a filling or a core build-up, while others suit a crown. The decision depends on the size and direction of the crack and the health of the pulp, so it is made after an examination.

What should I do with the broken piece of my tooth?

Keep it and keep it moist. The Victorian Department of Health advises storing an intact fragment "in milk or the saliva of the person with the broken tooth" and sealing it "in a container or plastic wrap", then seeing an oral health professional as soon as possible. Bring it with you.

My cracked tooth does not hurt. Can it wait?

No. The Department notes that chipped or cracked teeth "may or may not be painful. Either way, you should see an oral health professional as soon as possible because early repair can improve the survival of a damaged tooth." It ties survival to early repair, not to pain — so a crack that has settled down is still worth an appointment.

Is there a deadline for repairing a cracked tooth?

None is published. "As soon as possible" is the whole of the Department's timing advice: it gives no number of hours and no survival percentage. We will not quote you a deadline, partly because none exists and partly because believing a window has passed is a reason people delay care.

Could grinding be why my tooth cracked?

Possibly. A "cracked tooth" appears on the Department's teeth-grinding page both as a symptom of bruxism and among the problems it causes, alongside abnormal wear and "broken teeth or broken restorations". If you wake with aching teeth or a stiff jaw, have teeth sensitive to hot, cold or sweetness, or notice indentations on your tongue, mention it — repairing the tooth without addressing the cause leaves the cause running.

What mouthguard does the published advice recommend for sport?

A professionally fitted one, worn for training as well as games. The Department advises a mouthguard "for all sports and training where there is a risk of mouth injury, such as football, rugby, soccer, basketball, netball, water polo or hockey", and states that "an oral health professional can make you a professionally fitted mouthguard to give your teeth the best protection".

Related services and further reading

Emergency dentistry

What to do in a dental emergency

How a cracked tooth is treated

Dental crowns

Root canal therapy

Main symptoms and signs of toothache

Why people grind their teeth and how to manage it

Can you reverse tooth decay?

Acid attack and tooth enamel

How can we help?

If you think you have a cracked tooth, our team can see you at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online and tell us about your symptoms so we can offer a suitable time. We can examine the tooth, explain your options and quote before treatment starts, and we offer interest-free payment plans, with terms confirmed when you book. Learn more about our emergency dentistry and general dentistry services.

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

Interest-free payment plans, HICAPS on-site claiming and bulk billing for eligible children under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What does the term cracked tooth syndrome mean?

Cracked tooth syndrome is when a tooth has a crack but no piece has broken off. It often causes pain when biting or chewing. Core Dental dentists examine the tooth and test your bite to help confirm the diagnosis.

What is rebound pain in a cracked tooth?

Rebound pain is a sharp discomfort felt when you release a bite. The cracked segments move apart under pressure and spring back together, changing the pressure on the nerve. Core Dental dentists can assess whether this pattern fits a cracked tooth.

What symptoms can a cracked tooth cause?

Symptoms can include pain on biting, sensitivity to hot, cold or sugary food, pain that comes and goes, and sometimes swelling. These signs can also suggest other problems, so Core Dental recommends an examination.

How does Core Dental treat a cracked tooth?

Treatment aims to limit movement of the cracked sections. Options include a filling or core build-up, a dental crown, root canal treatment if the pulp is infected, or extraction in severe cases. Our dentists recommend what is suitable after examining the tooth.

When is a cracked tooth an emergency?

Call 000 for breathing or swallowing difficulty, significant jaw swelling or serious facial injury. For severe tooth pain without those signs, call Core Dental on 13 13 16 promptly, because we keep emergency appointments available where possible.

How do I book an appointment for a cracked tooth at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au, and describe your symptoms. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings across our nine Melbourne clinics, with Sunday closed.

Can I pay for cracked tooth treatment over time at Core Dental?

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans for some treatment. Figures published as at September 2026 include Payright plans at 0% interest over 3 to 30 months, so please confirm current terms when you book.