Toothache Symptoms and Causes Explained | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/main-symptoms-signs-toothache/

Details:

Toothache can feel like sensitivity, sharp pain or a dull ache. It may come and go in response to temperature or pressure, or it may start on its own and linger. The most common cause is tooth decay, followed by a cracked tooth, and other causes include gum problems, wisdom teeth, pain referred from nearby structures and sinus infection. Pain is a sign that something needs attention, so at Core Dental we recommend having a toothache examined rather than waiting for it to settle.

What are the most common causes of toothache?

Dental decay is the most common cause of toothache, followed by a crack in a tooth. Other causes include gum problems, wisdom tooth problems, referred pain and sinus infection. Each one needs a different approach, which is why your dentist will examine the tooth and surrounding area before recommending treatment.

What types of pain can indicate a toothache?

Toothache can present as sensitivity, sharp pains or a dull ache. The pain may be brief, coming on in response to hot or cold or to pressure when you bite. It may also start spontaneously and linger with no obvious trigger. Neither pattern tells you for certain what is wrong, so please let us know exactly how it feels.

What information helps a dentist diagnose the cause?

When you book, it helps to note:

the level and type of pain

when and how it gets worse

what eases it

how long the tooth has been tender

Our dentists use this information along with an examination and, where appropriate, X-rays and other tests to work out the cause.

What is rebound pain with a cracked tooth?

Rebound pain is pain that occurs when you bite, and it is often sharpest at the moment you release the pressure. It is thought to happen because the cracked segments of a tooth move apart when you bite down, then snap back together when you let go, which suddenly increases pressure on the nerve.

Teeth are more likely to crack when they have large fillings, when the person has a heavy bite, after a root canal treatment has left the tooth fragile, or after chewing on hard foods. Crowns are sometimes recommended to add strength and support to a tooth that has been heavily treated. Your dentist will

carry out a number of tests to decide on treatment. You can read more in our article on how a cracked tooth is treated .

How can gum problems cause toothache?

Gums can become infected, and the pain can feel like a toothache. Gum recession can also cause pain because it exposes the dentine of the tooth. Cold air, food or drink then causes a short, sharp, cold sensation. Depending on the cause, your dentist may suggest a sensitive toothpaste, fluoride varnish or, in some cases, gum treatment. Our article on gum health has more detail.

Can wisdom teeth cause toothache?

Yes. Sometimes there is not enough room for wisdom teeth to come through and they become impacted. Impacted teeth can become infected and cause discomfort in the gum, sore jaws or a dull throb in the area. You can learn more in our guide to wisdom teeth pain .

Can sinus infection or other conditions cause tooth pain?

Sometimes a toothache is not caused by the tooth itself but is referred from surrounding structures. A sinus infection is a less common but significant cause of a sore tooth, and it is often accompanied by a blocked nose and tenderness around the sinuses. If your dentist suspects a cause outside the mouth, they may suggest you see your doctor.

A tooth can also feel sore after a filling. This sensitivity generally settles within one to two weeks, but please contact us if it persists or gets worse. We have more on this in tooth sensitivity after a filling .

Why is it important to have a toothache checked by a dentist?

A lack of symptoms does not always mean a tooth is healthy. It is common to have no symptoms until the later stages of decay and infection. The earlier a problem is found, the more likely it is that treatment will be simpler, so we encourage regular check-ups and prompt visits when something feels unusual.

Even if the pain seems to have settled, there may still be an underlying cause that needs attention. Painkillers or antibiotics may give temporary relief, but they are not a treatment for the cause. If the cause is not addressed, the pain may return, and in more serious cases an infection could spread.

How can I prevent toothache?

Good oral hygiene and regular check-ups are the foundation. Brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, cleaning between your teeth and seeing your dentist for routine examinations at the intervals they recommend help find problems early. Whatever kind of pain you have, we recommend seeing your dentist as soon as possible so they can examine the area, run any tests needed and recommend suitable care.

How should I plan my visit?

Explain your concern, symptoms and timing when you book, and bring relevant medical information and a current medicines list. Your dentist can assess your teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, request imaging where clinically appropriate, and explain your options. Ask what the recommended

approach is intended to achieve, what alternatives exist, what aftercare involves and what risks apply. We quote before treatment starts, and our interest-free payment plans can help spread the cost.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. For severe tooth pain or swelling without these emergency signs, contact us promptly.

How can we help?

If you have a toothache, our team can see you at any of our nine Core Dental clinics, and we reserve emergency appointments where possible. Learn more about emergency dentistry or what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment . Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Toothache is a symptom with several different sources

The useful thing about toothache is not a description of the pain but a way of telling which of several problems is causing it. The published advice gives distinct symptom patterns.

Pattern one: decay that has reached the nerve. The Victorian Department of Health: "If your tooth has been aching then decay may have reached the centre of the tooth and the nerve inside. When this happens, root canal treatment may be needed to keep the tooth in your mouth."

Before that stage, decay announces itself differently: "As decay gets worse, people often experience sensitivity to sweet, cold or hot food and drinks. If you feel this kind of discomfort, speak to your dentist as soon as possible to have the decay treated."

Pattern two: the pulp itself, with a broader symptom list. The Department's symptoms of damaged or infected pulp: "unprovoked or spontaneous pain"; "sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods"; "pain when biting or chewing"; "loosening of the tooth"; "swelling of the gum near the affected tooth"; "oozing of pus surrounding the affected tooth"; "facial swelling".

"Unprovoked or spontaneous pain" is the distinguishing feature — pain that arrives without a trigger, rather than discomfort that follows something cold or sweet.

Its causes are: "deep-seated and untreated tooth decay"; "decay beneath a deep filling"; "trauma that damages a tooth"; "habitual tooth grinding (bruxism)"; "long-standing cracks in the teeth"; "advanced gum disease".

Pattern three: the gums rather than the tooth. Signs of advanced gum disease include "bleeding gums"; "red/swollen gums"; "receding gums (the gum line shrinks away from the tooth making teeth look longer)"; "bad breath"; "a bad taste in the mouth"; "tenderness when biting"; "loose teeth, or teeth that have moved".

Tenderness when biting with no obvious cavity, plus bleeding gums, points here rather than to the nerve.

Pattern four: a wisdom tooth. The Department's signs of gum infection around one: "red, inflamed gum near the wisdom tooth"; "facial swelling"; "pain and sensitivity"; "pus coming from the gum"; "swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw"; "difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing"; "fever"; "food getting stuck and difficult to clean out"; "bad breath".

Pattern five: the jaw joint, not a tooth at all. healthdirect, the Australian Government's health information service, lists "pain in your jaw, especially when eating"; "an ache or pain in front of your ear"; "a locking sensation in your jaw"; "a clicking or grating noise when you chew"; and "hearing problems, such as tinnitus".

Pattern six: grinding. The Department's grinding symptoms include "headache, jaw joint and/or ear pain"; "aching teeth, particularly just after waking up"; and "aching or stiffness in the jaws while chewing, particularly during breakfast". Timing on waking is the clue.

Pattern seven: exposed dentine from erosion. Where enamel has worn, "these areas and any exposed tooth root surfaces can become sensitive to hot, cold and sweet foods and drinks due to the acid damage", and the areas "appear yellow on the tooth surface".

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025); Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025); Gum disease, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); Wisdom teeth, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (the page states its review date as 3 June 2022); Teeth grinding, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 17 October 2025); Dental erosion, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); healthdirect (Australian Government), Temporomandibular joint dysfunction, healthdirect.gov.au (the page states it was last reviewed November 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

The signs that should not be waited out

Most of the patterns above need an appointment. A few need one sooner, and the published advice is specific enough to act on.

Swelling and pus. The Department's account of an untreated infected pulp: "Once the pulp becomes infected, it loses its ability to fight the spread of the infection. If bacteria find their way into the pulp chamber, the bacteria will multiply. This can cause an infection or an endodontic abscess (a pocket or 'blister' of pus) when it spreads into the surrounding bone which can become severe."

Its listed complications are bone loss, where "the infection may spread around the ends of the infected root canal and erode surrounding jawbone", and loss of the tooth — with the warning that "tooth replacement options are available but may be limited if the infection has already caused advanced bone loss."

So facial swelling, or pus around a tooth, is on the symptom list of something that spreads.

Fever and difficulty swallowing , from the wisdom tooth infection list: "fever"; "difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing"; "swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw".

An ulcer that is not healing. "If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can." A mouth ulcer that will not heal is also on the Department's oral cancer symptom list, alongside "white or red patches in the mouth/tongue/gums", "loss of sensation anywhere in the mouth", "difficulty swallowing, moving your tongue, or moving your jaw", "loose teeth or sore gums", "altered taste" and "swollen lymph glands".

A chipped or cracked tooth, whether or not it hurts. "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."

A filling that has come out. "If part of your filling breaks off or if your whole filling falls out, see your oral health professional as soon as possible."

Jaw symptoms with any of three others. healthdirect: "Seek urgent care if you have symptoms of TMJ dysfunction, as well as" "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches".

And the case where there is no pain at all. "Sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms. In these cases, the problem is usually diagnosed by special tests or x-rays during a dental check-up or treatment for other dental concerns." Which is why the Department cautions: "Having no pain does not always mean that your teeth and mouth are healthy."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025); Wisdom teeth, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (the page states its review date as 3 June 2022); Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 2025); Dental injuries, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026); Dental fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); healthdirect (Australian Government), Temporomandibular joint dysfunction,

healthdirect.gov.au (the page states it was last reviewed November 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Why does my tooth hurt when I bite down?

Pain when biting can be caused by a cracked tooth, decay, a loose or high filling or inflammation around the root. A crack often causes sharp pain when you release the bite. Because the causes differ, your dentist needs to examine the tooth and may take an X-ray.

Is it safe to wait if my toothache goes away?

We do not recommend waiting. Pain can fade even though the cause is still there, and decay and infection can progress without symptoms. An examination can find out why it hurt and whether treatment is needed to stop it coming back.

Can a toothache be caused by a sinus problem?

Yes. A sinus infection can make the upper teeth feel sore, often with a blocked nose and tenderness around the sinuses. A dentist can check your teeth first and, if the cause seems to be outside the mouth, suggest you see your doctor.

How long should a tooth feel sore after a filling?

Some sensitivity after a filling is common and generally wears off within one to two weeks. If the pain is severe, keeps getting worse or lasts longer, contact your dentist so the filling and bite can be checked.

Do painkillers or antibiotics fix a toothache?

They may give temporary relief, but they do not treat the underlying cause. A dentist needs to find the cause, such as decay, a crack or a gum problem, and recommend suitable treatment so the pain does not return.

What does it mean if the pain comes on by itself?

That is the pattern most associated with the nerve. "Unprovoked or spontaneous pain" is first on the Victorian Department of Health's list of symptoms of damaged or infected pulp, and it is different in kind from discomfort that follows something cold or sweet.

What if the sensitivity only follows sweet or cold things?

That is more characteristic of decay. "As decay gets worse, people often experience sensitivity to sweet, cold or hot food and drinks. If you feel this kind of discomfort, speak to your dentist as soon as possible to have the decay treated."

Could it be my gums rather than a tooth?

It could. Signs of advanced gum disease include "bleeding gums"; "red/swollen gums"; "receding gums"; "bad breath"; "a bad taste in the mouth"; "tenderness when biting"; and "loose teeth, or teeth that have moved".

Could a wisdom tooth be the cause?

Its infection signs are distinctive: "red, inflamed gum near the wisdom tooth"; "facial swelling"; "pus coming from the gum"; "swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw"; "difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing"; "fever"; "food getting stuck and difficult to clean out"; "bad breath".

What if the pain is worse on waking?

Grinding is worth considering. The Department's symptoms include "aching teeth, particularly just after waking up" and "aching or stiffness in the jaws while chewing, particularly during breakfast", along with "headache, jaw joint and/or ear pain".

Could it be my jaw joint instead?

healthdirect lists "pain in your jaw, especially when eating"; "an ache or pain in front of your ear"; "a locking sensation in your jaw"; "a clicking or grating noise when you chew"; and "hearing problems, such as tinnitus (ringing in your ears)".

What if my teeth look yellow where they hurt?

That can be exposed dentine from erosion. Those areas "appear yellow on the tooth surface" and "can become sensitive to hot, cold and sweet foods and drinks due to the acid damage".

Which symptoms should not wait?

Facial swelling or pus around a tooth, since an infection "can cause an infection or an endodontic abscess (a pocket or 'blister' of pus) when it spreads into the surrounding bone which can become severe". Also fever, difficulty swallowing, or swollen lymph nodes under the jaw.

What about an ulcer that is not healing?

"If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can." A non-healing ulcer is also on the Department's oral cancer symptom list.

I have a chipped tooth but no pain. Does that still need seeing?

Yes. "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."

What if a filling has come out?

"If part of your filling breaks off or if your whole filling falls out, see your oral health professional as soon as possible."

Can something be wrong with no pain at all?

Yes. "Sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms", and "having no pain does not always mean that your teeth and mouth are healthy".

Related services and further reading

Emergency dentistry

General dentistry

Root canal therapy

Fillings and restorations

Cracked tooth: how it hurts

Cracked tooth: how it is treated

Wisdom teeth pain

What to do in a dental emergency

What to expect from a root canal

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.

Emergency appointments reserved daily where possible.

Interest-free payment plans and HICAPS on-site claiming.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through 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

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What does toothache feel like?

Toothache can feel like sensitivity, sharp pain or a dull ache. It may be brief, triggered by temperature or pressure, or it may start on its own and linger. Core Dental dentists examine the tooth to find the

cause.

What is the most common cause of tooth pain?

Tooth decay is the most common cause of toothache, with a cracked tooth next. Gum problems, impacted wisdom teeth, referred pain and sinus infection are other causes that a Core Dental dentist can help to tell apart.

What is rebound pain in a cracked tooth?

Rebound pain is pain felt when you bite and release, often sharpest on release. A cracked tooth can open slightly under pressure and close again when you let go, which irritates the nerve. Core Dental dentists use tests to confirm a crack.

Can gum recession make my teeth hurt?

Yes. When gums recede, the dentine of the tooth can be exposed, causing a short, sharp sensation with cold air, food or drink. Core Dental dentists may suggest sensitive toothpaste, fluoride varnish or other gum care depending on the cause.

Which information should I give the dentist about my toothache?

Tell the Core Dental team how severe and what type the pain is, when it gets worse, what eases it and how long the tooth has been tender. This helps your dentist decide which tests and X-rays are needed.

Can I get an emergency appointment for toothache at Core Dental?

Core Dental reserves emergency appointments where possible across our clinics. Call 13 13 16 and describe your symptoms. Call 000 first if you have uncontrollable bleeding, serious facial injury or trouble breathing or swallowing.

Why should I not wait for toothache to settle?

Pain can ease while decay or infection continues, and many dental problems cause no symptoms until the later stages. Core Dental recommends an examination so any underlying cause is found early, when treatment is often simpler.

How do I book a toothache check at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au. Mention when the pain started and what makes it worse, and bring your medicines list and medical information to your appointment.