What Is a Dental Emergency and What Should You Do? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/what-is-a-dental-emergency-and-what-should-i-do-if-i-am-experiencing-a-dental-emergency/

Details:

A dental emergency is an urgent problem affecting the teeth, mouth, jaw or surrounding areas that starts suddenly, is severe and needs prompt care from a dentist rather than a routine appointment. Examples include severe tooth pain, a knocked-out tooth, a broken tooth, facial swelling or bleeding gums. If you have uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, or a serious facial injury, call 000 straight away. For other dental emergencies, call Core Dental on 13 13 16 as soon as you can.

When should you call 000 instead of a dentist?

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, a serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. Do not wait for a dental appointment in these situations. You may also need to go to a hospital if you have been in a serious accident with cuts to the skin or broken bones and heavy bleeding, if you are struggling to breathe, or if you cannot open your mouth because of a large swelling. If you are unsure what to do, contact your dentist for direction, but do not delay urgent medical care.

What are common examples of dental emergencies?

Common examples include:

tooth pain caused by decay or an abscess

cracked, chipped or broken teeth

knocked-out teeth, also called avulsed teeth

loose or lost crowns or fillings

bleeding from the gums

facial swelling or swelling in one area of the gum

dental trauma from accidents or sport

infected or impacted wisdom teeth

in rare cases, jaw joint (temporomandibular) pain or a dislocated jaw

Some of these can feel manageable at first and still need prompt attention. A dentist can work out how urgent your situation is.

What should you do if you have severe tooth pain and cannot see a dentist right away?

Until you can be seen, general first-aid steps include rinsing your mouth with salt water, gently cleaning around the tooth with floss and a toothbrush to remove trapped food, and taking pain relief medication as directed on the label or by your doctor or pharmacist.

Signs that you should see a dentist as soon as possible include pain that comes on by itself and lingers, pain at night that wakes you, significant pain with hot or cold drinks and pain when you bite. Swelling of the face or gum, a bad taste or fever can be signs of infection and should be assessed promptly.

What should you do if you have a cracked tooth?

If a tooth is cracked, find any missing piece and bring it with you, see your dentist as soon as you can and apply a cold compress to the outside of your face to help with swelling and discomfort. A small chip may not need urgent care if the tooth is not sharp and is not painful, but it is still worth having checked at your next visit.

What should you do if a tooth is knocked out?

A knocked-out adult tooth is time-sensitive. The chance of saving it depends on how quickly it is treated, so act fast and see a dentist as soon as possible.

Find the tooth and, if you can, push it gently back into its original position. Avoid touching the root, and rinse it gently with milk or saline if it is dirty.

Try to remember the time the tooth was knocked out, and tell the dentist.

If you cannot put the tooth back, keep it in milk and head to the dentist.

If a baby tooth has been knocked out of position, or you are unsure whether it is a baby tooth, do not place it back. Go to the dentist as soon as you can for an assessment.

We have a separate article on what to do if you or your child's tooth is knocked out .

What should you do about a loose crown or filling?

Keep the crown or filling safe in a bag or container and see your dentist as soon as you can, even if you are not in pain. The exposed tooth can be sensitive and more open to further damage, and the restoration may be able to be re-cemented or replaced.

How should you handle a dental emergency?

Stay calm and deal with it quickly. Explain your symptoms, when they started and any injury to the person who answers the phone. A useful first step is to bring relevant medical information and a list of your current medicines. The dentist can then assess the teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, take images when clinically appropriate, and explain your options.

It is reasonable to ask what the recommended approach is intended to achieve, whether there are alternatives, what aftercare involves and what risks apply. Fees, recovery time and follow-up depend on the diagnosis and the complexity of care.

How can we help?

At Core Dental we publish this information, but access to an urgent appointment depends on the practice, the clinician and how urgent your problem is. Where possible we reserve emergency appointments each day, so please call 13 13 16 early and tell us what has happened. Our team can then advise you on the next step. See our emergency dentistry page and our article on emergency dental care across Melbourne . Call 000 for life-threatening symptoms.

A knocked-out adult tooth: the published first aid, in order

This is the one dental situation where what you do in the next few minutes changes the outcome, and there is a published step-by-step list. It is worth knowing before you need it.

The Victorian Department of Health: "If an adult (permanent, or secondary) tooth is knocked out, there is a good chance it will survive if it is put back into position straight away, and you seek professional help immediately. Every minute a tooth is out of the gum, the less chance it has of surviving."

Every minute matters — and note that the Department sets no deadline. It does not say the window closes after any period, and we are not going to invent one. Someone who believes it is too late may not seek help at all.

The steps, verbatim:

"Stay calm"

"Handle the tooth by the crown (smooth white part that is normally visible), not the root (yellowish pointy part)."

"If the tooth is dirty, gently rinse it in milk or saline for a few seconds. If this is not possible, rinse with the person's saliva. Avoid rinsing the tooth with water, however if there is no other way to get the tooth clean, then rinse as briefly as possible with water. This is less damaging than pushing dirt into the tooth socket."

"Holding the clean tooth by the crown, gently put it back into the hole in the gum (socket). Make sure the pointy yellowish root(s) is the part that goes into the socket. Only do this if the person is conscious."

"Get the person to hold the tooth in place by gently biting on something soft, like a tissue or a napkin."

"Assist the person to see an oral health professional immediately."

If it cannot go back in: "Try not to let the tooth dry out - place it in milk or ask the person to spit into a clean container or plastic food wrap, and place the tooth in their saliva."; "Do not use water to rinse or store the knocked-out tooth."; "Seek immediate advice from an oral health professional."

The exception that matters. "Never try to put a baby (deciduous or primary) tooth back in the gum if it is knocked out. This can damage the developing permanent tooth underneath the gum." The Department explains: "The baby tooth could fuse to the bone, causing problems when it's time for it to fall out naturally, and might affect the growth of the adult tooth, bone and gums."

Telling them apart: "Baby teeth are smaller, smoother and usually whiter than adult teeth. Children's adult teeth are often more yellow, larger, and can have bumps on their biting edge."

A broken piece. "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."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental injuries, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026). Accessed 6 November 2026.

The other situations the published advice treats as urgent

Not every emergency involves an impact. Four other situations have published "as soon as possible" or "immediately" language attached, and one has a specific time limit.

A chipped or cracked tooth, with or without pain. "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."

Swelling or pus around a tooth. The Department's account of an infected pulp: "Once the pulp becomes infected, it loses its ability to fight the spread of the infection", which "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 symptom list includes "swelling of the gum near the affected tooth", "oozing of pus surrounding the affected tooth" and "facial swelling", and its complications include bone loss and loss of the tooth.

Around a wisdom tooth, the infection signs are "facial swelling"; "pus coming from the gum"; "swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw"; "difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing"; and "fever".

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."

An ulcer that is not healing — and this one has a stated limit. "If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can."

Two weeks. The Department also lists "a mouth ulcer that won't heal" among oral cancer symptoms, 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".

Jaw symptoms with certain others. healthdirect, the Australian Government's health information service: "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 prevention, since most dental trauma is avoidable. "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." The Department adds: "An oral health professional can make you a professionally fitted mouthguard to give your teeth the best protection."

Training is included in that instruction, not just matches.

One thing this page cannot tell you. Published state health advice gives no waiting times, and says nothing about any particular practice's emergency availability. For an injury happening now, the Department's instruction is to seek professional help immediately — and if the situation involves more than teeth, that means medical help rather than dental.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental injuries, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026); 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 fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 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

Is a toothache a dental emergency?

It can be. Severe pain that lingers, wakes you at night or comes with swelling or fever should be assessed promptly. Mild, short-lived sensitivity can often wait for a booked appointment, but your dentist can advise you.

Should I go to hospital or the dentist for a broken tooth?

A broken tooth should usually be seen by a dentist. Go to hospital or call 000 if the injury involves heavy bleeding, difficulty breathing, a suspected broken jaw or other serious injury to the face or head.

What can I do for swelling in my face or gums?

Swelling can signal infection, so contact a dentist promptly. A cold compress on the outside of the face may help with discomfort. If swelling makes it hard to breathe, swallow or open your mouth, call 000.

What should I bring to an emergency dental visit?

Bring any broken tooth pieces or a knocked-out tooth stored in milk, a list of your medicines, details of allergies and your health fund card if you have one. Tell us the time the injury happened.

Can children have dental emergencies too?

Yes. Falls and sport injuries are common causes. A knocked-out baby tooth should not be pushed back in, and a knocked-out adult tooth needs urgent attention. See a dentist promptly for any injury to a child's mouth.

What should I do if an adult tooth is knocked out?

Put it back if you can, and get help immediately. The Victorian Department of Health: "There is a good chance it will survive if it is put back into position straight away, and you seek professional help immediately. Every minute a tooth is out of the gum, the less chance it has of surviving."

How should I handle the tooth?

"Handle the tooth by the crown (smooth white part that is normally visible), not the root (yellowish pointy part)." If dirty, "gently rinse it in milk or saline for a few seconds", or in the person's saliva.

Can I rinse it under the tap?

Avoid it if you can. "Avoid rinsing the tooth with water, however if there is no other way to get the tooth clean, then rinse as briefly as possible with water. This is less damaging than pushing dirt into the tooth socket." For storage, "do not use water to rinse or store the knocked-out tooth".

How do I put it back?

"Holding the clean tooth by the crown, gently put it back into the hole in the gum (socket). Make sure the pointy yellowish root(s) is the part that goes into the socket. Only do this if the person is conscious." Then "get the person to hold the tooth in place by gently biting on something soft, like a tissue or a napkin".

What if it will not go back in?

"Try not to let the tooth dry out - place it in milk or ask the person to spit into a clean container or plastic food wrap, and place the tooth in their saliva." Then "seek immediate advice from an oral health professional".

Is there a time limit?

The Department gives none, and we are not going to invent one. Its whole statement on timing is that "every minute a tooth is out of the gum, the less chance it has of surviving".

What about a child's baby tooth?

Do not put it back. "Never try to put a baby (deciduous or primary) tooth back in the gum if it is knocked out. This can damage the developing permanent tooth underneath the gum."

How do I tell which it is?

"Baby teeth are smaller, smoother and usually whiter than adult teeth. Children's adult teeth are often more yellow, larger, and can have bumps on their biting edge."

Is a chipped tooth an emergency if it does not hurt?

It should still be seen promptly. "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 about swelling or pus?

That is on the symptom list of something that spreads. An infected pulp "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". Around a wisdom tooth, "fever", "difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing" and "swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw" are also listed.

How long can I leave a mouth ulcer?

Two weeks is the published limit. "If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can."

When do jaw symptoms need urgent care?

When they come with "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches".

How do I avoid dental injuries in sport?

"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", and "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

What to do if a tooth is knocked out

Emergency dental care across Melbourne

Should my child see a paediatric dentist or general dentist?

When should I consult a specialist for a dental problem?

Cracked tooth treatment

Dental crowns

General dentistry

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.

We quote before treatment starts, offer interest-free payment plans and claim from your health fund on the spot with HICAPS.

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 is considered an urgent dental problem at Core Dental?

Core Dental treats sudden, severe problems such as intense tooth pain, a knocked-out or broken tooth, a lost crown or filling, facial swelling, bleeding gums and mouth injuries as urgent. Call 13 13 16 and we will advise you on the next step.

When should I call 000 rather than Core Dental?

Call 000 for uncontrollable bleeding, trouble breathing or swallowing, serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. Do not wait for a dental appointment. Core Dental can help with dental problems that are not life-threatening.

How do I get an urgent appointment at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 as early as you can and describe what happened. Where possible we reserve emergency appointments each day, but availability depends on the practice, clinician and how urgent your problem is.

What should I do with a knocked-out adult tooth?

Find the tooth, avoid touching the root, rinse it gently with milk or saline, and push it back into place if you can. Otherwise keep it in milk and see a dentist straight away. Core Dental can be reached on 13 13 16.

Should I put a knocked-out baby tooth back in?

No. If a baby tooth has been knocked out, or you are unsure whether it is a baby tooth, do not place it back. Go to a dentist as soon as you can for an assessment. Core Dental can advise you by phone.

What can I do at home for severe tooth pain before I see a dentist?

General steps include rinsing with salt water, gently flossing and brushing to remove trapped food, and taking pain relief as directed on the label. These do not replace an examination, so contact Core Dental on 13 13 16.

What should I do if my crown or filling comes out?

Keep the crown or filling in a clean bag or container and call Core Dental as soon as you can, even if it does not hurt. Our dentist can check the tooth and explain whether it can be repaired or replaced.

Which Core Dental clinics can I call for an urgent dental problem?

You can call Core Dental on 13 13 16 for any of our nine clinics: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.