

Tooth loss in children

Some parents may feel that caring for baby teeth isn't as crucial as caring for adult (permanent) teeth, simply because baby teeth are designed to fall out anyway. However, baby teeth are very important. They allow the child to chew food, and they reserve the spaces in gum tissue for future adult teeth.

For example, if a baby molar is prematurely lost, the baby teeth next to the missing tooth may drift into the gap and create spacing problems for the adult tooth when it comes through. Decayed baby teeth also need professional dental treatment and, in some cases, specialist treatment in a hospital under a general anaesthetic. If neglected, decayed baby teeth can lead to mouth pain, dental abscess and the decay of surrounding teeth.

Losing baby teeth

From the age of about six years, baby teeth start to become 'wobbly' and fall out to make way for adult teeth. It is perfectly normal for a child to lose their first tooth up to a year or two earlier or later than six years of age. Girls generally lose teeth earlier than boys. The first tooth to fall out is usually located in the front of the lower jaw.

Losing baby teeth can be unsettling and painful for young children. Suggestions for parents include:

- Reassure your child that losing baby teeth is a natural process and new adult teeth will come in their place.
- Use cold compresses or over-the-counter anti-inflammatory pain-killing drugs to help relieve loose tooth pain. Please consult your dentist or pharmacist for recommendations on appropriate medication for your child.
- Offer reassurance – it's normal for gums to be tender and bleed a little, although some children experience little or no discomfort while losing their teeth.
- Make use of the Tooth Fairy. This mythology has lasted a long time for a good reason. If the idea of getting a coin in exchange for a tooth softens the idea of tooth loss for your child, then go ahead and use it!

Mouthguards are important

Mouthguards help keep dental injuries to a minimum, particularly when playing contact sports. All children playing contact sports should wear a mouthguard, even primary school aged children. Professionally fitted mouthguards are comfortable, allow speech and do not restrict breathing. Suggestions for parents and carers include:

- Avoid do-it-yourself 'boil and fit' type mouthguards – they are unlikely to provide effective protection. See your child's dentist to have a customised mouthguard fitted.
- Ensure your child wears their mouthguard at training and during the game. It may help to talk to their coach about it as all sporting clubs are encouraged to have a compulsory mouthguard policy.
- Update your child's mouthguard every 12 to 18 months to ensure that it still fits and is fully effective.
- Keep the mouthguard clean.
- When not in use, store the mouthguard in a rigid container and away from heat to ensure it maintains its shape.

Saving a knocked-out tooth

If a tooth is knocked out, you should:

- Remain calm.
- Find the tooth, handle it by the crown only, and check that it's clean.
- Rinse it in milk or wash it very briefly with plain water if the root is dirty.

- Replant the tooth immediately in the socket. Ideally, this should be done within 15 minutes of the tooth being knocked out. This maximises the chances of effective re-implantation by the dentist.
- Hold the tooth in place. This can be done with aluminium foil, a mouthguard or your fingers.
- If you can't replant the tooth, keep it moist by submerging it in milk, sealing it in plastic wrap, or placing it in the child's mouth next to the cheek.
- Seek immediate dental treatment. Time is critical. If too much time elapses, the tooth cannot be saved.

What NOT to do with a knocked-out tooth

Do not:

- Hold the tooth by the root surface
- Scrape or rub the root surface
- Let the tooth dry out
- Rinse or store the tooth in water for more than a second or two.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dentist
- Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch Inc. Tel. (03) 8825 4600
- Dental Health Services Victoria Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039
- The Maternal and Child Health Line is available 24 hours a day Tel. 13 22 29

Things to remember

- Caring for baby teeth is as crucial as caring for adult (permanent) teeth.
- If neglected, decayed baby teeth can lead to mouth pain, dental abscess and the decay of surrounding teeth.
- All children playing contact sports should wear a mouthguard, even primary school aged children.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch

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