

Dental care - common conditions - 0 to 5 years

Babies and toddlers need parents to care for their teeth, gums and mouths. Oral thrush, mouth ulcers and cold sores (herpes simplex infections) are common problems. Tooth abscesses and cellulitis (facial swellings) require immediate treatment by a doctor, dentist or other oral health professional.

A child's teeth should be checked regularly. This will help to pick up the early signs of dental disease or prevent it from developing.

Oral thrush

Oral thrush is a fungal infection that affects the superficial layers of the mouth surface. It is common in young babies and infants. Thrush appears as milky white patches in the mouth, which cannot be wiped away easily. At the same time, the child may have a thrush infection in the nappy area or a fever and gastrointestinal irritation (this is very rare and may indicate a more general infection).

Treatment for oral thrush

Thrush is treated with antifungal agents (ointments) applied directly to the affected areas.

Mouth ulcers

Mouth ulcers affect 20 per cent of the population. They are painful and tend to come back as one or multiple sores (lesions) that are a few millimetres in size. They can show up anywhere in the mouth and usually heal on their own in a week or two. If ulcers do not heal after two weeks, it is important to consult a doctor, dentist or other oral health professional.

Treatment for mouth ulcers

There is little that can be done to treat mouth ulcers, but you can help reduce the pain by:

- Reducing your child's intake of orange juice and other citrus foods
- Giving your child fewer salty foods, for example Vegemite
- Applying topical anaesthetic (ointment) to the affected area, especially before eating.

If the mouth ulcers are accompanied by a fever, your child may have a herpes simplex (viral) infection. This infection is often seen in babies and young children.

Oral herpes (cold sores)

Herpes can develop if someone with a cold sore kisses a child. If exposed to the herpes simplex virus, children can develop a general infection around the nose and mouth. Signs and symptoms include:

- Small clusters of vesicles (blisters) that rapidly erupt in the mouth or on the gums
- Yellowish ulcers surrounded by a red halo, which develop after the vesicles burst
- Red, swollen gums that bleed when touched
- Fever, feeling unwell and irritability.

Herpes is very common. The first attack usually leads to immunity. Any later lesions that the child develops are usually isolated cold sores.

Treatment for oral herpes

Diet can help to treat the symptoms of oral herpes and reduce the pain associated with it. A child's diet should include:

- Adequate fluid intake, preferably water
- Bland foods such as natural plain yoghurt and custard
- Few or no salty, spicy or acidic foods.

Herpes can come back because of sunlight, heat, fever or trauma. If tingling, throbbing and burning is felt in the affected area before the lesion erupts, antiviral creams or anaesthetic ointments can be applied to the area so that they do not come back.

Other mouth lesions

Other lesions that can develop in a child's mouth include:

- **A tooth abscess** – caused by an infection around the root of the tooth, which appears as a pimple on the gum. When the gum is pressed, there may be a discharge of pus. It is **important** to seek immediate attention from a doctor, dentist or oral health professional immediately.
- **Measles** – this condition first appears as small white spots that look like grains of salt, surrounded by inflammation. They appear two to three days before the measles rash shows on the body.
- **Hand, foot and mouth disease** – characterised by blister-like (vesicular) lesions in the front of the mouth and on the hands and feet, sore throat or mouth and a low grade fever. This disease will heal by itself.
- **Eruption cysts** – for example, a bluish, dome-shaped cyst that appears over the erupting tooth. Usually treatment is not required because the cyst bursts when the tooth erupts.
- **Geographic tongue** – pink to red smooth patches that appear on the tongue. This condition is not harmful and treatment is not usually required. Try not to let a child eat acidic and spicy foods, as the tongue may be tender.
- **Cellulitis** – is an infection that spreads across a child's face, causing a rash and fever. It has the same causes as a tooth abscess, but the infection has the ability to spread. Immediate assessment by a doctor, dentist or other oral health professional is required.
- **Mucocele** – a soft, bluish-grey swelling on the lower lip. This can be caused by trauma to the lower lip – often from lip biting. These will often burst and heal by themselves. If they persist, see a doctor, dentist or oral health professional as treatment may be required.

Financial assistance

All children from birth until the start of secondary school are eligible for public dental and oral health services. Children receive general oral health care as well as dental check-ups and treatment. For more information and to find your closest public oral health service, call 1300 360 054 or visit the Dental Health Services Victoria website at www.dhsv.org.au

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Your dentist or other oral health professional
- Your public oral health service. To find your closest service Tel. 1300 360 054.
- The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne clinic Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday.
- For emergencies contact your public oral health service or the Royal Dental Hospital emergency service Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) between 8.00am and 9.15pm Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 9.15pm weekends and public holidays
- Your maternal and child health nurse.

Things to remember

- Mouth ulcers and thrush are often seen in young babies and infants.
- For many mouth lesions, it helps if your child avoids salty, acidic or spicy foods.
- If mouth ulcers don't heal within two weeks, a doctor, dentist or other oral health professional should be consulted.
- Tooth abscess and cellulitis require immediate treatment by your dentist (or other oral health professional) or doctor.

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Dental Health Services Victoria

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