
Teeth

Summary

- Teeth are important for eating, speaking, self-confidence and overall health.
 - We have two sets of teeth over our lifetime – ‘baby’ teeth and ‘adult’ teeth.
 - Baby teeth start to fall out around the age of six or seven years and are slowly replaced by the permanent (adult) teeth.
 - Just because they get replaced doesn’t mean we can neglect baby teeth. They play an important role in holding space for the adult teeth.
 - By around 21 years of age, the average person has 32 permanent teeth.
 - To look after them, brush your teeth and along your gum line twice a day.
 - Ask your oral health professional how often you need to have a dental check-up.
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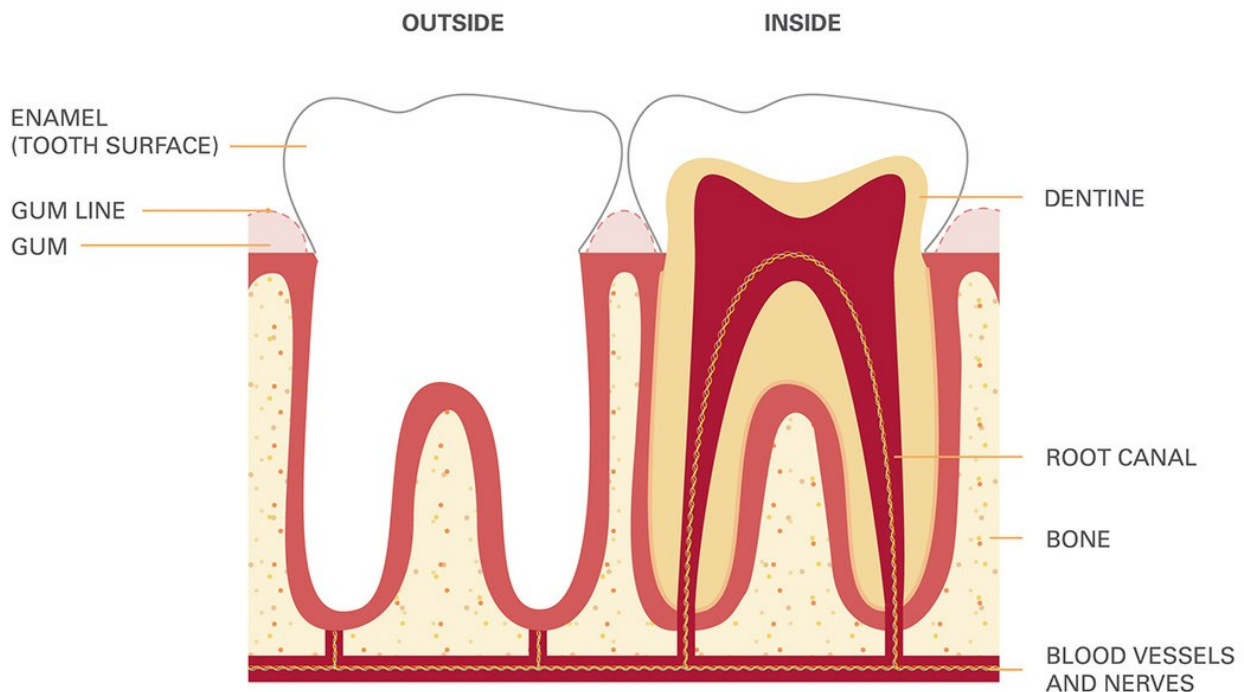


Image: Dental Health Services Victoria

A person has two sets of teeth over their lifetime – ‘baby’ teeth and ‘adult’ teeth. Children usually have their full set of 20 baby teeth (also known as deciduous, primary or milk teeth) by age three.

Baby teeth start to fall out at about six or seven years of age and are slowly replaced by the permanent (adult) teeth. By around 21 years of age, the average person has 32 permanent teeth; 16 on the top and 16 on the bottom.

Teeth have an important role in eating. They are different shapes and sizes to bite, tear, crush or grind food before it is swallowed. They help us to form sounds and speak clearly, and they are an important part of a person’s smile. In this respect, teeth can be associated with a person’s confidence and social interaction.

The health of your teeth is an important part of your overall health. Diseases in teeth and gums can affect other parts of your body, including the heart.

Baby teeth play an important role in chewing and nutrition, and in holding space for the adult teeth. For these reasons it is important to prevent disease and early loss of these teeth.

Parts of the tooth

Teeth are made of the following components:

- **crown** – the part of the tooth that sits above the gum line
- **enamel** – the hard outer layer that protects the crown. Enamel is harder than bone and doesn't have any nerves or a blood supply. It is usually smooth and off-white in colour. Chipped or decayed enamel cannot grow back
- **dentine** – most of the tooth is made up of dentine. It is a hard bone-like substance. If the protective layer of enamel is damaged, and the underlying dentine is exposed, the tooth will be sensitive to temperature and sweet or acidic foods. A tooth which has exposed dentine may also be at greater risk of tooth decay
- **pulp** – the living centre of the tooth that contains blood vessels and nerves. The nerves communicate sensory information such as temperature, pressure and pain
- **root** – the section of tooth that sits below the gum line. The root is held firmly within the bone of the jaw. Depending on its size, a tooth will have between one and three roots. Each root has a small hole at the tip, to let nerves and blood vessels pass in and out of the pulp
- **cementum** – a hard material that covers the root surface.

Teeth and eating

Teeth help us to eat by breaking food into smaller pieces so that it can be further digested in the stomach and intestines.

Teeth have different shapes to do different jobs. Types include:

- **incisors** – these front teeth in the upper and lower jaws are used to bite. The blade-like surfaces of the upper and lower incisors come together like a pair of scissors. There are four upper and four lower incisors each in the deciduous ('baby') and permanent sets of teeth
- **canines** (sometimes called 'eye' teeth) – are located next to the incisors in the upper and lower jaws. They are used to tear food. There are two upper and two lower canines each in the deciduous ('baby') and permanent sets of teeth
- **premolars** – these teeth have flat surfaces to crush food. There are four upper and four lower permanent premolars. There are no premolars in the deciduous ('baby') set of teeth
- **molars** – these are the back teeth. They are larger than premolars and have big flat surfaces that grind food. The flat surfaces of both premolars and molars have small pointy parts called cusps that help to grind food. Over time, cusps are worn down. There are six upper and six lower permanent molars, and four upper and four lower molars in the set of baby teeth.

Tips for caring for teeth

Teeth are important for eating, speaking and socialising, so it's important to take good care of them.

Some tips include:

- Brush your teeth and along your gum line twice a day, in the morning and at night before bed. Use a toothbrush that has a small head and soft bristles. Gently brush your teeth and gums, making sure to brush each tooth on the front, back, and top.
- Over 18 months of age, use fluoride toothpaste. Use low-fluoride children's toothpaste for children aged 18 months to six years of age, and standard fluoride toothpaste for people aged six years and older.
- Avoid sugary foods and drinks. If you do have these foods, it is better to have them at meal times rather than between meals. Also avoid foods and drinks that are acidic – for example, soft drinks and fruit juices, as acid damages the tooth surface.
- Drink plenty of tap water. Most of Victoria's tap water has fluoride in it, which helps to repair the tooth surface. If your water is not fluoridated, talk to your oral health professional.
- Ask your oral health professional how often you need to have a dental check-up.

- Wear a mouthguard when you train for and play sports where your teeth could get damaged (for example football, rugby, soccer, basketball, netball, water polo or hockey).
- Quit smoking to improve your oral health and general health.

Read more about [tooth care](#).

Tooth conditions

Some examples of problems that can affect the teeth include:

- **tooth decay**
- **gum disease**
- loss of the tooth surface (enamel) through:
 - **dental erosion** (caused by acids from food and drinks, or acids coming up from the stomach)
 - dental abrasion (often due to incorrect or forceful tooth brushing)
 - dental attrition (often due to grinding or chewing)
- tooth and jaw alignment problems such as crooked, crowded or overlapping teeth
- **tooth grinding** (bruxism)
- tooth trauma, such as a broken or **knocked out tooth**
- developmental defects of the teeth such as '**chalky teeth**' (molar hypomineralisation)

Where to get help

- Your dentist
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provides public dental services through the **Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne** and community dental clinics, for eligible people. For more information about public dental services Tel. **(03) 9341 1000**, or **1800 833 039** outside Melbourne metro
- **Australian Dental Association 'Find a Dentist'** search function or Tel. **(03) 8825 4600**
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Your **GP (doctor)**

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

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