

# Tooth Abscess

## What is a tooth abscess?

A tooth abscess is a collection of pus around an infected tooth. There are 2 types of dental abscess:

- A pus-filled sac at the root of a tooth
- A pus-filled sac between the gum and a tooth

## What is the cause?

An abscess at the root is usually caused by severe tooth decay or injury. When decay reaches the inside or pulp of a tooth, which contains the nerves and blood supply, the pulp dies. The infection in the pulp can spread from the tip of the root to the surrounding bone and destroy bone in your jaw.

An abscess between a tooth and gum usually forms when bacteria and food get trapped in an area that is hard to clean.

Sometimes the cause of an abscess is not known.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of an abscess may include:

- Sensitivity to heat and cold
- A lingering ache
- Pain or throbbing with or without biting or chewing
- Redness and swelling of the gums
- Discolored tooth
- Tender glands in the neck
- Swollen face
- A bad taste
- A tooth that feels loose
- An open, draining sore on the side of the gum
- Relief obtained only from ice water

## How is it diagnosed?

Your dentist will ask about your symptoms and examine your teeth. You may also have X-rays.

Your dentist may use ice or an electric tester to check the health of a tooth. A battery-powered electric tester uses a small amount of electrical current to stimulate the nerve. A normal tooth will feel sensitive to the ice or the electrical stimulation but will feel relief when the dentist removes the ice or current. A tooth with an irritated nerve will have some sensation even when the dentist removes the ice or current. A dead tooth will not have any feeling at all.

Your dentist may slide a probe gently down the side of the tooth to check for pocketing. If you have an abscess, this procedure may release some of the pressure from built-up infection, but the pocket will have to be fully cleaned out to remove pus and debris.

## **How is it treated?**

### **Abscess at the root of a tooth**

Root canal therapy is the usual treatment for an abscess at the root of a tooth. A dentist or an endodontist (a specialist in this treatment) may do the root canal.

If you keep having infection after a root canal, you will need more treatment. Your dentist may refer you to an oral surgeon for surgery to remove diseased tissue.

When a root canal or surgery is not possible, your dentist may have to pull the tooth. You may then need to wear an implant, a bridge, or a removable partial denture to replace the lost tooth.

### **Abscess between the gum and a tooth**

Dentists usually treat an abscess between the gum and a tooth by first draining the infection and then thoroughly cleaning the area. Your dentist will then smooth the root surfaces of the tooth to help it heal and keep the infection from coming back. Before doing this procedure, your dentist may give you a shot of medicine to numb the gum and tooth.

Your dentist may recommend a follow-up X-ray of the tooth in 6 months to see how well the bone is healing and if the infection has cleared up.

Your dentist may recommend gum surgery to help heal an abscess between the gum and a tooth. This surgery, often performed by a specialist called a periodontist, involves reshaping the gum tissue to make a shallow area that is easier to keep clean and free from infection.

Your dentist may also prescribe an antibiotic to treat the infection.

If you have an area that tends to trap food every time you eat, a filling may be placed to close the opening.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your dentist. In addition, you can:

- Rinse your mouth 3 to 4 times a day with warm saltwater.
- Take ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or another pain-relief medicine prescribed by your dentist or healthcare provider. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, you should not take this medicine for more than 10 days.
- Chew on the other side of your mouth.

- Keep your mouth as free from bacteria as possible by brushing at least twice a day and flossing daily.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

Ask your dentist:

- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

## **How can I help prevent a dental abscess?**

The best way to prevent an abscess is to brush your teeth at least 2 times a day and see your dentist twice a year. At your appointments, your dentist and dental hygienist will:

- Examine your teeth and mouth
- Remove any plaque and tartar that have built up on your teeth
- X-ray your teeth once a year to check for decay and to evaluate the health of your jawbone and gums
- Teach you how to care for your teeth and maintain good oral health
- Alert you to any problem areas
- Recommend any needed treatments

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