

Dental treatment - overview

Everyone, including young children, should visit the dentist at least once every six months. Permanent teeth are designed to last a lifetime. The risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss can be reduced with good oral hygiene, a low sugar diet, use of a mouthguard and regular visits to the dentist or other oral health professional.

Modern techniques mean that dental treatment can be carried out with no or minimal discomfort.

Dental treatments

Some common dental treatments include:

- Dental check-up
- Scaling and cleaning
- Oral health advice
- Fissure sealants
- Dental fillings or restorations
- Root canal treatment
- Tooth extraction (removal)
- Fitting of dentures
- Fitting of mouthguards
- Dental implants (artificial teeth)
- Orthodontic treatment
- Referral for specialist dental services.

Dental check-up

Your dentist will inspect each tooth using small instruments inserted into your mouth, such as a mirror and probe (a fine, pick-like tool). The dentist looks for issues such as decay, gum disease and other conditions.

If a suspected dental problem is difficult to see (for example, possible decay between two touching teeth), the dentist may need to take x-rays. If a problem exists, this will be explained to you and the treatment options will be discussed. An estimate of the cost and appointment times will also be discussed.

Scaling and cleaning

Scaling and cleaning are used to remove built-up debris from the teeth. This may include food particles, soft plaque or hard calculus (caused by the continual accumulation of minerals from saliva and plaque – sometimes referred to as tartar). The dentist or hygienist then cleans and polishes the teeth using a rotating brush with abrasive paste. This helps treat and prevent gum disease. You will be given instructions on how to keep up your oral hygiene between appointments, as this is important to help maintain healthy gums.

Fissure sealants

Sealants protect teeth from decay. Any tooth that has deep grooves or fissures can be treated, but the most commonly treated teeth are the molars and premolars.

A sealant is a durable liquid plastic that is painted on to the biting surface of a cleaned tooth. It forms a physical barrier that stops food and other bacteria from collecting in the fissures of the tooth. Fissure sealants are commonly recommended for children, as they reduce the risk of decay in permanent teeth.

Dental fillings

Tooth decay that has caused a cavity is treated with dental fillings. The dentist uses a drill and other tools to remove the decay. The cavity is cleaned, dried and sealed with a filling material.

A variety of materials are available for filling the cavity. You will be given advice on the most suitable material, based on the size and location of the required filling. A common choice is tooth-coloured filling material, which can restore the aesthetic appearance of the tooth as well as the shape and function.

Restoring damaged teeth

Your dentist can suggest various treatments to restore damaged teeth. These treatments help restore the appearance, shape and function of your teeth. They include:

- **Bonding** – chipped, gapped, discoloured or oddly shaped teeth can be treated with bonding. A tooth-coloured resin filling is applied to achieve a more regular look to the affected tooth. However, the resin may need to be replaced occasionally.
- **Veneers** – teeth can be fitted with porcelain veneers. A veneer is usually 0.5mm thick and is permanently glued to the front of the tooth.
- **Crowns** – these are caps that are permanently cemented or bonded to a tooth. Crowns are made of porcelain and can be matched to the colour of the existing tooth.

Root canal treatment

Root canal treatment is a procedure that replaces a tooth's damaged or infected pulp with a filling. The 'pulp' is a sensitive tissue that provides oxygen, nutrients and feeling to the tooth. It is housed in the hollow centre of a tooth (pulp chamber), along with blood vessels and nerves. Once a tooth is fully formed, nutrition for the tooth comes from the tissues surrounding the root and the tooth can function without its pulp.

During root canal treatment, the pulp is removed from a tooth. The dentist cleans and shapes the root canals with a drill and small files. The tooth's interior is cleaned, dried and packed with a filling material that goes all the way down to the end of the root. An artificial biting surface is created for the tooth out of dental amalgam, composite material or a crown. This also protects the tooth from fracture, which can occur after root canal treatment. A root canal may need to be performed over a number of appointments.

Tooth removal (extraction)

Modern dentistry and oral health practitioners aim to preserve natural teeth. However, damaged or badly decayed teeth may need to be removed (extracted). The dentist may also recommend extraction to deal with wisdom teeth that are causing problems. These teeth can cause various dental problems, including overcrowding of the existing teeth and impaction (the wisdom tooth grows – erupts – at an angle and butts into the next-door molar or the gum). A tooth may be removed using local anaesthetic. Sedation or general anaesthesia may also be offered depending on the difficulty of the procedure.

Fitting of dentures

Dentures are artificial teeth that can be removed at will by the person. An 'immediate' denture can be made while you still have some of your teeth and is fitted on the day your teeth are removed. However, changes to the jawbone during the healing process may cause the denture to gradually loosen. Within a few months, the immediate denture may need realignment to improve the fit. Alternatively, a denture can be made a few months after teeth are removed. This allows time for the jawbone to heal and means that the denture should have a better fit.

Fitting of mouthguards

Mouthguards are protective devices that cover the teeth and gums to prevent injury to the teeth, lips and gums. They are frequently used while playing sport to prevent damage from accidental or deliberate knocks to the face. A dentist or oral health professional can take impressions of your teeth and make a well-fitting comfortable mouthguard to protect your teeth and gums.

Dental implants

A dental implant can be used to replace missing teeth. An implant is an artificial tooth that consists of a small titanium screw that is fixed into the jaw and an artificial tooth that is fitted on top of that. Numerous dental appointments are required. In time, the implant becomes fused with the bone of the jaw. Implants have a high success rate. However, this is a specialised field of dentistry, so your dentist or oral health professional may need to refer you.

Orthodontic treatment

Orthodontic treatment is often recommended to correct abnormalities in jaw and tooth position, such as an overbite or protruding ('buck') teeth. Your dentist can diagnose and treat these problems or, more usually, may refer you to an orthodontist for treatment. Corrective treatment may include braces or a removable device and subsequently a retainer appliance.

Referral to specialist services

For treatment in difficult or complex cases, the dentist may refer you to a specialist dentist.

Financial assistance

All children aged 0–12 years are eligible for public dental and oral health services.

You may also be eligible for public dental and oral health services if you fall into one of the following categories:

- Young people aged 13–17 years who are health care card holders or dependants of concession card holders
- All children and young people up to 18 years of age in residential care provided by the Children Youth and Families division of the Department of Human Services
- All youth justice clients in custodial care, up to 18 years of age.
- People aged 18 years and over, who are health care or pensioner concession card holders or dependants of concession card holders
- All refugees and asylum seekers
- Children enrolled in special development schools
- All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are treated at The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne.

Where to get help

- Your dentist, oral surgeon or other oral health professional
- Australian Dental Association, Victorian Branch Tel. (03) 8825 4600
- Dental Health Services Victoria Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039
- Community dental clinics Tel. 1300 360 054
- Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne Tel. (03) 9341 1000, 8.30am to 5pm Monday to Friday

Things to remember

- The risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss can be reduced with good oral hygiene, a low sugar diet, wearing a mouthguard and regular visits to the dentist.
- It is generally recommended that everyone, including young children, should visit the dentist at least twice every year.
- Modern techniques mean that dental and oral health treatment can be carried out with no or minimal discomfort.

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