

## Dental treatment - overview

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 and regular visits to the dentist.

Everyone, including young children, should visit the dentist at least once every year. Modern techniques mean that dental treatment is almost always painless.

### Dental treatments

Some common dental treatments include:

- Dental check-up
- Teeth cleaning
- Dental sealants
- Dental fillings/restorations
- Root canal treatment
- Tooth extraction
- Fitting of dentures
- Dental implants
- Orthodontic treatment
- Referral for specialist dental services.

### Dental check-up

The dentist inspects each tooth using small instruments inserted into the mouth, including a mirror and a probe (a fine, pick-like tool). The dentist looks for problems such as decay or gum disease.

If a suspected dental problem is difficult to see (for example, possible decay between two touching teeth), the dentist may take x-rays. If a dental problem is found, the dentist will explain the recommended treatment and give you an estimate of the cost and length of treatment. Most dental problems are scheduled for treatment at later appointments.

### Teeth cleaning

To clean teeth, the dentist removes built-up debris from the teeth. This may include food particles, soft plaque or hard calculus (deposits of calcium phosphate salt on the surface of teeth – sometimes called tartar). The dentist then cleans and polishes the teeth using a tool that releases a fine 'jet' of pressurised water, or an electric rotating brush with abrasive paste or both. This helps treat and prevent gum disease. The dentist can also provide advice and assistance on cleaning techniques, which are important to help maintain healthy gums.

### Dental sealants

Dental sealants protect teeth from decay. While any tooth that has deep grooves or fissures can be treated with dental sealants, the most commonly treated teeth are the molars and premolars.

A dental sealant is a durable liquid plastic that is painted onto the biting surface of a cleaned tooth. It forms a physical barrier that stops food from collecting in the fissures of the tooth. Dental sealants are commonly recommended for children as they reduce the risk of decay in permanent teeth.

### Dental fillings

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

A variety of materials are available to the dentist to use for fillings. The dentist can advise on the most suitable material, based on the size and location of the required filling. A common choice for fillings is tooth-coloured filling material, which can restore the aesthetic appearance of the tooth as well as 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. The dentist applies a tooth-coloured resin filling to achieve a more regular look to the affected tooth. However, the resin will need to be replaced occasionally.
- **Veneers** – teeth can be fitted with porcelain veneers. A veneer is usually half a millimetre thick and is permanently glued to the front of the tooth.
- **Crowns** – these are caps that are permanently 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 dental procedure that replaces a tooth's damaged or infected pulp with a filling. The pulp is extracted. 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 permanent filling. The artificial biting surface of the tooth is fashioned out of dental amalgam. Root canal treatment may be performed over a number of appointments.

## Tooth extraction

Modern dentistry aims to preserve natural teeth. However, damaged or badly decayed teeth may need to be removed (extracted). The dentist may also recommend extraction to treat wisdom teeth that are causing problems. These teeth can cause various dental problems, including overcrowding of the existing teeth and impaction (the wisdom tooth erupts at an angle and butts into the next-door molar or the gum). A tooth may be extracted using local or general anaesthesia.

## Fitting of dentures

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

## Dental implants

A dental implant can be used to replace missing teeth. An implant is an artificial tooth (or teeth) permanently bonded into the jawbone. A small titanium screw is fixed into the jaw and the artificial tooth is fitted on top of that. Numerous dental appointments are required. In time, the screw becomes fused with the bone of the jaw. Implants are successful in around 90 to 95 per cent of cases. Those that replace the front teeth in the lower jaw have a near-perfect success rate. However, this is a specialised field of dentistry, so your dentist 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, a retainer plate or both.

## Referral to specialist services

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

## Where to get help

- Your dentist
- 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 Tel. (03) 9341 0222 from 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, or after hours Tel. (03) 9341 0345

## Things to remember

- The risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss can be reduced with good oral hygiene, a low sugar diet and regular visits to the dentist.

- It is generally recommended that everyone, including young children, should visit the dentist at least once every year.
- Modern techniques mean that dental treatment is almost always painless.

**Want to know more?**

Go to [More information](#) for support groups, related links and references.

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Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch

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