

Chipped a Tooth? Here's What to Do Next
Prompt action can help ensure you get your smile back
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By Avery Johnson

Any impact, dealt at the right angle and with the right degree of bad luck, can chip a tooth. As your tongue runs over the now-jagged tooth edge inside your mouth, it's often hard to know how much damage is done. Edmond Hewlett, vice chairman of UCLA's Division of Restorative Dentistry, says chips aren't usually cause for great medical concern and your smile can almost always be returned to normal. Still, it is almost always a good idea to see your dentist shortly after injuring the teeth, says Dr. Hewlett, who also maintains a private practice in restorative and prosthetic dentistry.

What causes teeth to chip?

The enamel on the edges of teeth is brittle and slivers can cleave off with the right impact, Dr. Hewlett says. Front teeth are especially at risk because they are "kind of hanging out there over the bottom teeth." For back teeth, a big culprit is hard foods—candy or bones hidden inside food. Also, dental work can weaken teeth, making them more inclined to chip. There are degrees of severity. When just the enamel is broken off, "it looks terrible but feels OK," he says. If the tooth is very sensitive to hot and cold, or even to air, the tooth's inner layer may be exposed. And if you can see a little redness inside the tooth, the nerve chamber might be exposed.

When should you call a dentist?

Dr. Hewlett believes it is always a good idea to seek professional input. There may be a crack running through the tooth that isn't causing problems now, but you want your dentist to know it's there. X-rays may be needed to check whether there is damage to the root of the tooth. "But don't drop everything if you're not in distress," he says.

Watch out for signs of infection. Abscesses can form after traumas to a tooth, and it is important to have them treated, says Dr. Hewlett.

What should you do in the meantime?

If the chip is jagged and bothersome, covering it even with a piece of sugar-free gum will do, Dr. Hewlett says. He doesn't recommend filing a chip down at home, though he says a nonmetal emery board might be safely used to smooth a tiny jagged edge. For pain, clove oil has been used by dentists for centuries for its antibacterial and numbing properties. "Years ago it was the characteristic smell of a dentist's office," he says.

You don't need to stick to mushy food until the tooth gets fixed, unless it hurts to bite on it, says Dr. Hewlett. But avoid chewing hard food with the injured tooth since that might cause more to chip off. "As much as I love Jolly Ranchers, I have developed some self control," says Dr. Hewlett.

When a whole tooth has been knocked out, or a big piece broken off, the best practice, if possible, is to place it under the tongue and keep it there until you can get to a dentist, Dr. Hewlett says. (The old advice—putting the broken parts into a glass of milk—is no longer recommended by most dentists, he

says.) Chances are good the dentist will be able to bond the tooth back on and make it look natural again. Even if you don't have the broken parts, you have "excellent chances of getting your old smile back" with high-quality tooth-colored materials, he says.

How do you recommend preventing chipped teeth?

Dr. Hewlett suggests a mouthguard for anyone playing serious sports. The "boil and bite" variety found at drugstores will likely help. But he suggests using custom-molded guards available in dentists' offices, which are less bulky and available in cool colors. When eating, be mindful of what you are biting on. If you are gnawing on something really hard and you have to clamp down, listen to your body and back off, he says.