

Tooth Trauma: What Do You Do?

The annual Home and Garden issue of QB gives us hope that the long, cold, blustery winter may be finally replaced with warmer and longer days. As we're all looking forward to getting out of the house to enjoy the fresh air and longer days, it won't be long before the parks, fields, and bike paths are filled with people enjoying all sorts of summertime activities.

Nothing warms our hearts and souls more than watching our families enjoy these activities. It's inevitable, however, that someone gets injured (although it's usually accidental), and quite often that injury happens to the face, jaws, and teeth. Nothing can eliminate the panic and urgent sense of the situation, but you can take steps to protect and preserve the injured teeth.

Dental trauma is any injury to the mouth that includes teeth, lips, gums, tongue, jawbones, and the TMJ (jaw joint). Dental trauma can occur in many different ways, including car or bicycle accidents, fighting, falls, sports, and even eating very hard foods. In general, any dental trauma should receive prompt attention and treatment from a dentist or medical professional.

Dental trauma can be categorized based on the injury's location. The injury can occur to the structures of the tooth itself, the supporting structures of the tooth (including the gums and jawbone), the soft tissues of the mouth (both external and internal), and the TMJ. These injuries can occur in a single location or in any combination of locations.

First aid for tooth trauma

If someone receives a tooth injury, immediate first aid steps should be taken. The injured tooth and surrounding area should be rinsed with warm water to remove dirt and then covered with wet gauze to ease any discomfort. Any broken pieces should be saved, and a dentist should examine the injury as soon as possible.

If a piece of the tooth has chipped, but the pulp (nerve) is not disturbed, then the dentist may be able to repair the tooth with a filling. For larger breaks, the tooth may require more protection in

the form of a veneer or crown. There are times, however, when the tooth fracture is deep enough to involve the pulp. Younger teeth seem more prone to pulp exposure and injury due to the inherent larger size of the pulp space. In this case, the tooth will require a root canal, in which the injured pulp is removed from the tooth. Dr. Jeffrey Linden, a root canal specialist in South Barrington, cautions that "even if the pulp is not exposed, it's necessary to closely monitor the health of the pulp over time, as the nerve may die years later."

If the fracture involves the tooth root, it will often be necessary to remove the remaining pieces of the tooth. If this is the case, then careful planning in anticipation for dental implant placement must occur prior to removal of the tooth.

Take immediate steps

If a tooth sustains an injury, there also may be damage to the surrounding structures of the gums and bone. With this type of injury, the tooth will likely have moved out of position and become loose, or the tooth may have actually been knocked out of the socket. In this case, treatment by a dentist must occur immediately. If a permanent tooth has been knocked out, it may be saved with prompt action.

The tooth must be found immediately and handled with utmost care. The tooth should be picked up by the crown and not the root. It should be rinsed with cool water (but should never be scrubbed or washed with soap, toothpaste, mouthwash, or any other chemical). The tooth should not be dried or wrapped in tissue or cloth – instead, place it in a clean container of milk, cool water with a pinch of salt, or even in saliva. There are also emergency solutions for tooth preservation available at www.save-a-tooth.com that should be kept with your first aid kit.

Within 30 minutes of injury, the tooth should be re-implanted by a dentist and stabilized. If the tooth has been knocked out and handled properly, it may be possible to save that tooth for up to two hours after the injury. But the shorter the time the

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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tooth is out of the socket, the better chance for survival.

Most dental trauma is preventable. Everyone who participates in contact sports such as football, basketball, ice hockey, and wrestling should always wear a mouthguard. Mouthguards should also be worn along with helmets in non-contact sports such as skateboarding, in-line skating, and bicycling. Mouthguards are available commercially, but for the best fit and protection, your dentist can create a custom guard for you or your child. And of course, car seat belts should always be worn, with young children secured in appropriate car seats.

I wish you all a fun and, most of all, safe summertime season. U