

# Dental problems

**Dental health is important. Problems with your teeth or gums can cause pain and need to be checked out. This page has information on some of the common conditions that can cause dental problems and how to help keep your teeth and gums as healthy as possible.**

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, patients are advised to contact their local dental practice for advice and referral for emergency dental care if necessary. More information is available from the [Health and Social Care Board website](#).(external link opens in a new window / tab)

## Conditions that cause dental problems

This information may help give you an idea about what is causing your dental problems. Don't use it to diagnose yourself with a condition. Always leave that to a health professional.

There are many conditions that can cause dental problems. These include:

### **Bad breath (halitosis)**

[Bad breath](#) is a common problem that can affect anyone at any age. About one in four people are thought to have bad breath (halitosis) on a regular basis. Improving your oral hygiene is usually enough to cure bad breath and stop it happening again, (see section on 'how to help prevent dental problems').

### **Broken or knocked-out tooth**

If a [tooth is knocked out](#) it requires urgent treatment for the best outcome. If an adult tooth is knocked out, try putting it back in place and go straight to a dentist. Don't try to put back in place a knocked out baby tooth – take your child to see a dentist immediately.

### **Dental abscess**

A [dental abscess](#) is a collection of pus that forms in your teeth or gums. It forms as the result of a bacterial infection. Anyone with teeth can develop a dental abscess, children and adults are equally affected. You should see a dentist as soon as possible if you think you have a dental abscess. Avoid visiting your GP, as there is little they can do to help.

## **Gum disease**

[Gum disease](#) is a very common condition where the gums become swollen, sore or infected. You should see your dentist if your gums are painful, swollen or if they bleed when you brush your teeth.

## **Metallic taste in mouth**

A [metallic taste in the mouth](#) is not usually serious and can be a symptom of many different things. Treatment will depend on the cause. You should only see your GP if the taste doesn't go away or if there is no obvious cause. Read more about a metallic taste in the month.

## **Mouth cancer**

[Mouth cancer](#) is also known as oral cancer. Most cases occur in older adults aged 50 to 74. See your GP or dentist if you have [symptoms of mouth cancer](#) that don't heal within three weeks, particularly if you drink or smoke heavily.

## **Mouth ulcers**

[Mouth ulcers](#) are painful sores that appear in the mouth. Although uncomfortable, they're usually harmless and most clear up by themselves. They are common and can usually be managed at home, without seeing your dentist or GP. Visit your pharmacist first, unless your ulcer has lasted longer than three weeks.

## **Sore or painful tongue**

A [sore or painful tongue](#) is usually caused by something obvious and visible. There are a few less obvious causes that may need treating. See your GP or dentist if you have persistent pain and you haven't accidentally bitten or burnt your tongue.

## **Teeth grinding**

[Teeth grinding](#) and jaw clenching is often related to stress or anxiety. It doesn't always cause symptoms. Some people get facial pain and headaches. It can wear down your teeth over time. See your dentist to check for signs of grinding. See your GP if you think it's also stress-related.

## **Temporomandibular disorder (TMD)**

[Temporomandibular disorder \(TMD\)](#) is a problem affecting the 'chewing' muscles and the joints between the lower jaw and the base of the skull. If

you think you have TMD, see your dentist for diagnosis and to discuss treatment options. See your GP if the problem is not being caused by a dental problem.

## Toothache

[Toothache](#) refers to pain in and around the teeth and jaws that's usually caused by tooth decay. If you have toothache for more than one or two days, visit your dentist as soon as possible to have it treated. The longer you leave it, the worse it will get.

## How to help prevent dental problems

You can reduce your risk of developing dental problems by keeping your teeth and gums as healthy as possible.

To do this, you should:

- use floss or an interdental brush at least once a day to clean between your teeth and under the gum line
- brush your teeth with a [fluoride](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab) toothpaste twice a day – spending at least two minutes each time
- avoid rinsing your mouth with water or mouthwash after brushing because this washes the protective toothpaste away – just spit out any excess toothpaste
- cut down on sugary and starchy food and drinks – particularly between meals or shortly before going to bed
- have regular check-ups with your dentist – your dentist can suggest how often you should have a check-up, based on your oral health
- help your child have healthy teeth for life by having a [good dental health routine](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)
- don't delay dental treatments - there are a wide range of dental treatments available, some of which are readily available on the health service, such as fillings and root canal treatment