



Helping Hands

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DENTAL ABSCESS

A dental abscess is an infection of a tooth that has extended into the bone and tissues which surround the tooth. An abscess can occur from a large cavity which extends into the pulp of a tooth, a traumatic injury to a tooth, or sometimes after previous pulpal treatment of a tooth. The treatment of a dental abscess is dependent on whether the tooth is a primary or a permanent tooth, the age of the patient, which tooth is affected, and the extent of the infection beyond the tooth. In most instances in primary teeth, the treatment is removal of the tooth; and in permanent teeth, it is root canal therapy.

An acute dental abscess can have symptoms of pain, fever, swollen lymph glands, awakening from sleep, or a "gum boil". In some cases, the symptoms may only last a day or so and may be initially misdiagnosed as another systemic disorder. Once the nerve in the tooth dies, or becomes necrotic, the tooth will sometimes no longer exhibit any symptoms of pain but the infection is still present and requires appropriate treatment.

A dental abscess will occasionally develop some months after a tooth has received pulpal therapy. The frequency of this occurrence is approximately 10-20%. The tooth will usually not exhibit any symptoms of pain and the child and parents are usually unaware of the infection. A sore on the gum may be present and the abscess is usually discovered on an x-ray of the area. Baby teeth that show evidence of an abscess and have previously received pulpal treatment should be removed. Permanent teeth that have had previous pulp capping or pulpotomy treatments that show signs of abscess should be considered for possible root canal treatment by a specialist.

Follow up care for the removal of a primary tooth may include the placement of a space maintainer depending on the patient's age and which tooth is in question. Crown placement is necessary on permanent teeth that have received root canal therapy.

If a dental abscess is left untreated, the infection can cause loss of bone, gingival problems, pain, damage or malformation to an underlying developing permanent tooth, extensive future orthodontic treatment, or systemic illness, that in some cases can lead to hospitalization. Although rare, death has resulted from untreated abscesses in both primary and permanent teeth.