

Patient information from BMJ

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Dental abscess: what treatments work?

A dental abscess is an infected pocket of pus that forms at the root of a tooth or in the nearby tissue or bone. It can be very painful but most people recover quickly with treatment.

However, if an abscess is not treated early on, the infection can spread and this can be dangerous.

You can use our information to talk to your dentist and decide which treatments are right for you.

What treatments work?

To treat an abscess the dentist needs to remove the source of the infection. This can be done in two ways.

A root canal treatment

This is the most common treatment for an abscess at the root of a tooth. The dentist drills a small hole in the tooth and cleans out the bacteria and dead tissue inside the tooth's center (the root canal).

When the center of the tooth is clean the dentist fills and seals the tooth. You might need more than one visit to the dentist to complete this treatment.

Removing the tooth

If a tooth is badly damaged from decay or an injury, the dentist will take it out. When the abscess is alongside the tooth, the tooth might also need to be removed if the bone and tissue holding it in place have been damaged.

Along with these treatments your dentist might also make a **small cut in your abscess** and insert a **tiny tube to drain it**. You will probably have the tube in place for two to five days. This will help to get rid of the infection and allow the area to heal.

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If you have an abscess alongside a tooth and the tooth doesn't need to be removed, draining the abscess and having deep cleaning around the tooth and gums might be the main treatment you need.

If you have an abscess caused by your gums partly covering a wisdom tooth your dentist might recommend removing the tooth. Wisdom teeth sit far back in your mouth and are often hard to clean and floss, which can increase the chance of further problems.

A non-wisdom tooth with this type of abscess might also need to be removed if it has been badly damaged.

However, if the tooth can be saved, your dentist will probably recommend having a **small operation to remove the gum tissue** covering the tooth. This should help prevent future problems.

During these treatments you will probably have a **local anesthetic** to numb the area being worked on, so you will not feel any pain. You might also be offered a medication to help you relax.

Some people feel quite anxious about dental work. If you have any questions or concerns be sure to discuss these with your dentist.

As well as the treatments in and around your tooth and gums, your dentist might recommend taking a course of **antibiotics**. This will help your body get rid of any remaining infection.

An abscess can be very painful. Most people take medication to help them cope with the pain both before treatment and after, while they're recovering.

Over-the-counter **pain relievers** such as ibuprofen work for many people. However, if your pain is severe, your dentist might prescribe a stronger pain medication.

For more background information on dental abscess, see our leaflet *Dental abscess: what is it?*

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