
Care following dental surgery

This fact sheet provides people who have had dental surgery with information about what to expect during the recovery process, how to avoid complications and what to do if they occur.

Modern dental surgery can involve work on teeth, their supporting tissues or any of the soft tissue in the mouth.

What should I expect following dental surgery?

Healing usually occurs quickly without complications. Problems may arise because the mouth must be used for eating and speaking while healing is taking place. Additionally, the mouth can't be sterilised and there is always a risk of infection.

Following dental surgery, the anaesthetic effect may continue for some hours. Your mouth may feel swollen and uncomfortable during this period. You can expect some pain because the tissues have been disturbed during treatment. There may also be slight bleeding which is just enough to discolour the saliva for a few hours. There should be continual improvement until healing is complete.

How can I prevent complications following dental surgery?

You can help yourself to prevent complications such as pain, swelling, infection and bleeding by following a few simple rules.

- The blood clot that seals the wound is essential to the healing process. It prevents infection, helps new tissues form and stops the wound from re-opening. To avoid washing the blood clot away, don't rinse the mouth for the first four hours after surgery.

- Avoid excessive activity for about 24 hours.
- Don't lie down flat. Relax but keep the head elevated. This decreases the risk of bleeding.
- Don't place fingers, pencils or any other object in the mouth (to avoid injury or infection).
- To avoid injury, don't bite or suck a numb lip, cheek or tongue. Watch carefully that younger children don't chew or suck a numb lip, cheek or tongue.
- Avoid smoking or drinking alcohol as it delays healing.

When eating, follow these tips:

- Eat soft, nutritious foods such as soft-boiled eggs, finely chopped meat or cheese, custards, milk, soup or fruit juice.
- Chew on the opposite side of your mouth to the wound.
- Rinse your mouth gently after meals. Half a teaspoon of table salt in a glass of lukewarm water is an effective mouth rinse.

What should I do if complications occur?

The most common complications are pain, swelling, infection and bleeding.

- *Pain:* Control moderate pain by taking paracetamol. Take this in the usual way and do not apply the drug to the wound itself. If the pain persists or worsens, return to the surgery where you were treated. In most cases, pain can be controlled quickly.

- **Swelling:** Some swelling or difficulty in opening your mouth is common, but it should begin to subside after a day or two. If swelling persists, return to the surgery where you were treated.
- **Infection:** Continued pain, swelling or raised temperature may indicate an infection. Infection may spread or seriously delay healing. If you suspect an infection, return to the surgery where you were treated for advice.
- **Bleeding:** Continued bleeding is not normal. If your mouth is bleeding continuously, remove any excessive blood clots from the mouth as a first step. You should then apply a clean and damp rolled bandage or small folded handkerchief to the wound. Keep the cloth in place by applying pressure or by firmly closing your jaws on it. Sit down and maintain pressure for at least ten minutes. If the bleeding cannot be stopped using this method, telephone the surgery where you were treated for advice. After hours, report to the accident and emergency department of the nearest general hospital.

For more information

- Contact your dental professional
- Visit www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Email oral_health@health.qld.gov.au.

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