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## Warning signs you need to go to the dentist

If you experience a twinge in a tooth, dislodge a filling or notice a little blood when brushing, it might be time to make a dental appointment. But is it possible to distinguish between everyday aches and pains and something that needs treatment? And when is it time to request an emergency appointment?

### Prevention over cure

The best way to avoid the need for emergency appointments is to maintain regular [dental check-ups](#) and hygienist appointments so that problems can be picked up quickly, before they begin to cause discomfort or show symptoms. "It's all about prevention," explains dentist Dr Sam Jethwa. "If we maintain our regular 6- or 12-month dental check-up and separate hygienist cleaning, such problems should be kept to an absolute minimum."

Sadly, it seems that many adults and children in the UK are not maintaining regular dental appointments. According to [NHS data](#) only 44.5% of UK adults and just 29.8% of children were seen by an NHS dentist in the 24 months to December 2020. Whilst clearly the COVID-19 pandemic will have had an impact on these data, numbers for the previous period up to December 2019 still reveal that fewer than 50% of UK adults were seeing a dentist regularly.

### Ways a dentist can help

Clearly regular visits to a dentist are the best way to maintain healthy teeth and gums. As well as identifying potential problems and providing treatment at an early stage, your dentist can also use X-rays to identify your 'risk profile' as a patient. X-rays enable your dentist to pinpoint problem areas and offer specialist advice on how often you should be seen and how best to care for your teeth.

Hygienist appointments are also important, as they help to improve and maintain gum health. "Hygienists are different from dentists, as they are especially trained to look after somebody's gums," explains Jethwa. "You should visit a hygienist at least every twelve months, and ideally at 3- to 6-monthly intervals."

## Minor symptoms

It's tempting to put off seeing the dentist, in the hope that any problem might resolve without treatment. However even if your symptoms are not particularly troublesome, it's important not to ignore dental warning signs. "Just because everything's quiet, doesn't mean it's healthy," says Jethwa. "If you break a tooth, and you're not in a huge amount of discomfort, perhaps it can wait a week or so. But the only way to really know what's happening is for a dentist to diagnose. Pain in the mouth can be caused by a number of things - broken teeth, decay, [bleeding](#), biting, an infection - there is a huge amount that needs to be assessed."

So whilst it may be tempting to avoid booking that dental appointment, pain, discomfort and other dental symptoms warrant a trip to the dentist.

## Warning signs

Any pain, discomfort or other troublesome symptoms should mean a trip to the dentist. However, if symptoms are more pronounced or you are experiencing pain, you may need to seek emergency dental care to ensure you are seen before a problem worsens.

"If you have an [abscess](#) or swelling on the inside or outside of your mouth, are suffering severe pain, have excessive bleeding, have broken a tooth or develop a fever, you need to visit your dentist urgently. As a general rule, if anything looks angry or particularly nasty then it probably needs to be seen straightaway," says Jethwa.

## Finding a dentist

Ideally, all adults and children should already be registered with a local dentist. However, occasionally it can be hard to find a dental practice that has room on its books for new patients. If you don't yet have a dentist, the [NHS service finder](#) will help you to identify local NHS dentists in your area. However, you will need to contact the dental practice directly to find out if they are currently taking on NHS patients.

If you are unable to find a local NHS practice that is taking on new patients, help is at hand. Once you have contacted local dentists, if you are still unable to find a suitable practice but do not need emergency treatment, [NHS England's Customer Contact Centre](#) should be able to advise.

## Emergency dental care

If you are experiencing severe pain, showing signs of infection, or are struggling to contact your dental surgery in an emergency, calling 111 is the best way forward. NHS emergency dentists will be available even during evenings or at weekends to treat you and the phone line staff will be able to put you in touch.

Whilst it may be tempting to contact your GP – perhaps due to familiarity or because you are unsure as to whether your situation would be classed as an 'emergency' – this is not the right course of action. Although GPs can prescribe painkillers, they are not able to offer treatment for dental problems.

[Dr Sarah Jarvis](#), GP and Clinical Director of Patient.info, agrees. "Doctors are not dentists – dentists are dentists. As GPs, we have had absolutely no training in any dental problems, so cannot make a diagnosis and therefore can't reliably provide the correct treatment. Although GPs can prescribe antibiotics, these aren't always the right treatment, even in the short term, so seeing a GP rather than a dentist could make matters worse."

As with health problems elsewhere in the body, dental problems need to be taken seriously and treated appropriately. If you are concerned about any aspect of your dental health, it's important to seek specialist care.

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