

## TOOTH ACHE: WHAT TO DO

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I have had several tooth aches and each one hurts differently. Please tell me why they are sensitive and hurt so much, and what a person is to do. G.R.

There are several different sensations a person may have, including temperature sensitivity, sore gums, pain on biting or touch, sharp, dull, throbbing, pain coming in waves or steady. Discomfort can come from within the tooth or around it. Symptoms can vary from tooth to tooth and a dentist should be seen for diagnosis and treatment. The sooner a dentist can be provided with information, the more quickly the problem may be solved and return to comfort. Thirty percent of the population will not see a dentist until they are in severe pain.

The source of toothache pain can be a mystery, and there are times a person has to wait until they can tell exactly where the pain is coming from. Pain can be referred to other areas. One may feel certain it is coming from an upper tooth, yet the cause may be from a lower tooth, and visa versa. A lower tooth may refer pain to the ear, an upper tooth may refer pain to the eye area. The pain is usually due to the nerves within the tooth becoming inflamed or infected with bacteria, or inflammation in the gums or the ligaments around the tooth. Teeth can ache from allergies affecting the sinus membranes and can be seasonal.

Temperature sensitivity and pain when biting on something can be due to many things. For example, if gum disease is present, if there is a sinus infection or inflammation, or if the ligaments have been stressed by recently biting on something hard, a tooth may become sensitive to temperatures and/or pressure. Root exposure from receding gumline areas, consuming acidic foods, or using "Tartar Control" products can lead to temperature sensitivity. If a tooth is cracked there will often be a sudden sharp pain when biting that goes away quickly. If there is a cavity (decay) a person may have pain after eating something with sugar (brushing with baking soda will often help stop the ache instantly). It helps to give the dentist thorough information, with symptoms from the beginning, to help them solve the problem.

Early symptoms of a problem may be short term cold sensitivity; the tooth hurts for a few seconds and it goes away quickly. Lingering pain, lasting minutes, when consuming something cold is usually not a good sign. If the tooth is dying, the cold sensitivity usually stops after a few days and the tooth becomes very sensitive to hot things; short-term pain progressing to lingering pain. Pain can start coming in waves at this point and be so severe it can make you cry. It has been described like a "rollercoaster of pain". Sucking on a piece of ice can help at this stage, but root canal therapy or removal of the tooth will need to be done soon or pain can worsen and swelling can occur.

Another symptom may be spontaneous pain; severe pain occurring suddenly for no reason, with a lingering ache. The final sign is often swelling, and no pain or steady pain may be present. If an abscess is forming, a tooth may be sensitive to touch or bite on, and it may feel loose.

Narcotics do not help toothache pain very much. If an adult can take an anti-inflammatory, such as, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen-type products, such as, Tylenol, the combination will typically work the best, and at low cost. No more than 3-200 mg ibuprofen (maximum 600 mg) and 2-Tylenol (maximum 1,000 mg) every 6 hours, can be most helpful short term, any more can damage the liver or kidneys of an adult. Also, an ice pack held on a painful or swollen area, on 10 minutes and off 10 minutes (do not freeze the skin) will help.

Symptoms may vary, and some of those mentioned above may not occur. Tooth aches can be very painful, and abscesses in the head and neck area can be life threatening quickly, so see a dentist soon if you start to have tooth problems. Similar to most diseases, once pain is felt the problem is usually in the advanced stages. Treat yourself to comfort by seeing your dentist regularly, and let them help you prevent pain and problems.