

Oral pain and its implications for health

Oral pain – basically any pain in the mouth – may involve the roof of the mouth, floor of mouth, tongue, cheeks, teeth, or gums.

All oral pain has a cause, although in some cases the exact cause may not be immediately apparent. Pain due to trauma, such as biting of the tongue, lips, or cheeks, usually subsides in a few days. However, if any type of oral pain persists, it is important to seek professional advice from a doctor or dentist.

Oral pain from mouth ulcers

Mouth ulcers can be incredibly painful, and can inhibit a person's ability to eat, drink, talk and even sleep. A common cause of recurring mouth ulcers is ill-fitting dentures. However, these can easily be adjusted by a dentist to relieve the pain and to prevent recurrence.

Another type of mouth ulcer is the *aphthous ulcer*, which some individuals experience as a recurring issue. Aphthous ulcers can be very painful, however there is a special ointment that can be applied to ease the pain until they heal. Seeking advice from a doctor or dentist is important in order to find the correct treatment.

Less common, but far more serious, are incidents of mouth cancer that appear as ulcers that fail to heal. The most common sites for mouth cancer are on lips and the tongue. If you have painful ulcers that fail to heal, then you should seek professional advice urgently.

Oral pain from tooth decay

The most common pain in the mouth arises from late stage dental caries (tooth decay). In this case, there is a cavity or hole in the tooth, and pain is felt when consuming hot foods or sweet drinks. Initially, this pain subsides soon after eating or drinking, but will recur. It is not a good idea to ignore these symptoms because, eventually, the pain will become more severe and the decay more serious.

If the decay is treated when the pain is first noticed, it is likely that the decay will not be too deep. In the case of early detection, the decayed part of the tooth can be drilled out and the gap can be restored with a filling material, and the pain will be gone. However, if treatment is not sought early and the pain has reached the point where it is no longer tolerable, this means that the decay has extended deeply inside the tooth, reaching the root canal, which contains the blood vessels and nerves. It is highly likely that you will need root canal treatment. Root canal treatment will save the tooth and involves the removal of blood vessels and nerves and the placement of a root filling. The alternative to root canal treatment is tooth extraction – obviously an extreme option.

The problem with dental caries is that pain is only associated with late stage decay, and late stage decay needs expensive treatment – be that fillings, root canal treatment, crowns, implants, or other treatments. Early decay – before hole development – is not painful, and therefore most people are



unaware that there is a problem. To avoid toothache and the need for dental treatments down the track, attending regular dental check-ups is essential; this is when early stage decay can be caught and treated before it progresses to the late stage point where the need for more expensive and intrusive treatments arises.

Oral pain from gum disease

Oral pain arising from gum disease also occurs only in the later stages of the disease. By the time an individual experiences pain from gum disease, it is likely that teeth are already loose, and significant damage has occurred. Again, to avoid this problem, regular dental check-ups are necessary to catch and treat early disease.

Prevention is always the best option

Pain in the mouth is a serious health concern. If it is not directly related to trauma, then it is usually a sign of late stage disease which needs to be attended to urgently. To avoid the high costs and pain associated with late stage disease, it is highly recommended that you attend regular dental check-ups when early stage disease can be treated effectively.

Associate Professor Wendell Evans

Sydney Dental School, USYD, and Founding Member Oral Health Advisory Panel

ABOUT:

The Oral Health Advisory Panel (OHAP), is a group of independent healthcare professionals with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of good oral health and its impact on general wellness. The Panel aims to take oral health beyond the dental clinic.

Follow the Oral Health Advisory Panel via twitter @OHAPanel to stay up to date with practical advice on good oral health habits.