

Just to Let You Know

**Wine gum, pork rind,
a pen lid, granary bread
and an olive stone!**

What do all these have in common?

In the last few months at our practice, they have all caused patients to break parts of their teeth.

Why do teeth break?

It is often due to the presence of small cracks in the teeth usually radiating from a filling which has weakened the tooth.

A good analogy is a ceramic tile. Intact and fixed to the wall the tile is very strong. If you drill a hole in the tile you will get micro-cracks radiating from the hole and the tile will risk breaking.

We will see more fractures in patients as they age. This is a reflection of the greater number of fillings and more years of building up cracks.

Do some people get more fractures?

Heavily filled teeth apart, we see more tooth fractures in patients who grind or clench their teeth as a habit.

It's called bruxism, and often it happens as we sleep but can occur when we are concentrating on a task such as driving or glued to that computer. The clenching and grinding will cause micro-fractures in the tooth structure making it more prone to breakages.

There are many theories about bruxism and just as many people claiming to be able to "cure" it. Really good scientific studies do not uphold many of the cures.

Help! My tooth has fractured! Is it an emergency?

No, not usually. If it is a lower tooth and the fractured area is in the tongue side then sometimes it irritates the edge of the tongue. More often the tooth is slightly more sensitive than usual to very hot or very cold foods and drinks. If you are on holiday (the olive stone scenario) don't panic, just call us while you are away to book on your return.

How will you repair the fracture?

A simple chip may be smoothed and no restorative treatment be required. This is reserved for small chips in enamel only. Chips into dentine usually require treatment, as they are larger and dentine is porous. Sometimes we can only temporarily dress the tooth to prevent further damage, and book a longer appointment to complete further work.

Usually a tooth-coloured filling material can be bonded to the tooth to replace the missing portion. It is made of plastic with quartz or glass particles embedded into it. It is shaped onto the tooth, and some are set using a special blue light.

My tooth was hurting when I bit on something hard-its stopped now the tooth has broken.....help!

Dentists call this the cracked tooth or cusp (is the pointed part of the biting surface of the tooth) syndrome. The signs can be difficult to spot and the symptoms varied. You may get pain from time to time when you are chewing, especially when you release the biting pressure. Extreme temperatures, especially cold, may cause discomfort, or you may be sensitive to sweetness, but with no signs of decay.

Surely you can spot this on an x-ray?

Cracks in teeth usually don't show up on an x-ray. Sometimes we can see the crack by shining a strong light into the tooth. Either at the side of the tooth or over the tooth once we have removed the filling within it. This practice has a devilish little device called a Tooth Slooth which has lots of different shapes to place very slight stresses on the edges of the tooth and cusp. If all else fails we remove the filling and then use the light to detect the crack.

And when you still cannot find the crack?

Generally we will prepare the tooth for a crown and place an acrylic temporary crown. If the symptoms subside then we know that they were only due to the moving crack and the temporary crown and subsequent permanent crown will help. If the pain persists then it means that the nerve has become inflamed and a root canal treatment must be done first. Dec 2008