



# Tooth Infection: Treatment and Risks

## Good news: Tooth infection can be treated

### How It All Starts

Infections can develop when the bacteria that naturally live in our mouths is allowed inside the tooth or below the gum line. This could occur due to severe tooth decay, broken or cracked teeth, failing fillings, or even gum disease. Infection of the tooth presents as an abscess, or puss pocket, which may develop below the roots of a tooth or alongside the gums.

### How Tooth Infection is Treated

Tooth infections can become very serious. Whenever one suspects they have a tooth infection, they should contact their dentist right away. The dentist will determine the best plan to treat an abscessed tooth, which can vary, depending on the location and severity of infection.

In many cases, the dentist will first prescribe antibiotics to help tame the infection and prevent it from spreading to other areas of the body. If the prescribed antibiotic is not effective, the course of their antibiotic may be extended, or the type of antibiotic changed altogether.

Taking antibiotics can reduce the size of the abscess, often easing the pain experienced from the infection, but make no mistake, that abscess will remain and can and will likely flare back up if the infected tooth isn't permanently treated. Recurring tooth infections tend to be more painful than the original infection and may be more resistant to antibiotics the second time around.

Depending on the location of the abscess, the dentist may also drain the abscess to reduce the infection.

Once the infection is managed, the treatment options for the tooth are either extraction or root canal treatment. Extractions are usually effective for abscessed teeth, as the entire tooth is removed. Root canal treatment, on the other hand, allows the patient to keep their natural tooth. In this case, the dentist will drill into the tooth and remove any infected tissue from the inside of the tooth/root. Once the infected tissue is removed, the dentist will fill the roots with a special filling material, then permanently restore the tooth with a filling or crown.

For severe cases, when a root canal may not be enough to treat an infection, the tooth may also require an apicoectomy. An apicoectomy is the removal of the tooth apex(es), or the very tip(s) of the tooth root(s). To perform this procedure, the dentist has to cut into the gum and bone tissue to expose the tooth root in order to remove the tips and any infected tissue.



### A Common Occurrence

Tooth infections can be a painful, yet common, occurrence. The good news is that tooth infections can be treated. Left untreated, however, these infections can turn into some seriously bad news.

## The Risks of Leaving a Tooth Infection Untreated

Left untreated, an infection that starts in a tooth can spread. It can spread to other tissues in the mouth, the jaw bone, the blood, and even other organs.

The types of infection that can occur from an untreated abscess are:

- Cellulitis – an infection of the skin and fatty tissue found beneath the skin (face and neck)
- Osteomyelitis – a bone infection, which would usually start with the bone surrounding the tooth
- Parapharyngeal abscess – a secondary abscess located at the back of the mouth
- Cavernous sinus thrombosis – an infection of the blood vessels located within the sinuses
- Sepsis – a severe infection in the blood that triggers an overreaction of the immune system
- Systemic infection – an overall, very serious infection caused from an infection in the blood spreading to other systems in the body (respiratory system, lymphatic system, digestive system, etc.)

Those who suspect they have a tooth infection should see their dentist right away, as waiting until the infection spreads could mean hospitalization, organ failure, or even death.



For more oral health information, please visit our website at [www.bcbsfedental.com](http://www.bcbsfedental.com).



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