

Dentist
Dr Lincoln Tentena

How to save a knocked-out tooth

A fall on a wet floor, a collision during a football game, or even a playground accident can sometimes result in a tooth being completely knocked out. Dentists call this an avulsed tooth, and it is considered a dental emergency. The good news is that quick and correct action at home can significantly increase the chances of saving the tooth.

The first hour after the accident is critical. Staying calm and following a few simple steps can make the difference between losing the tooth permanently and successfully restoring it. If a tooth has been knocked out, locate it immediately When picking it up, hold it only by the crown, which is the white chewing part of the tooth. Avoid touching the root, the pointed end that normally sits inside the gum. The root contains delicate fibres that help the tooth reattach, and touching them can damage these important tissues.

If the tooth is dirty, rinse it gently under cool running tap water for no more than 10 seconds. Do not scrub it, brush it, or use soap or disinfectants. These actions can destroy the cells needed for successful reattachment.

Try to put the tooth back in place

If the injured person is conscious, calm, and able to cooperate, gently try to place the tooth back into its socket. Ensure it is facing the same direction it was before the injury. Nearby teeth can help guide its correct position.

Once it is back in place, ask the person to bite down gently on a clean cloth or gauze to keep the tooth stable. Reimplanting the tooth within about 20 minutes offers the best chance of saving it.

Keep the tooth moist

If you cannot place the tooth back into the socket, keeping it moist is extremely important. The best option is to place it in a container of cold milk, which helps preserve the living cells on the root.

If milk is not available, the tooth can be kept in the person's mouth by placing it inside the cheek against the gum, provided they are old enough not to swallow it. Saliva can also help maintain the root cells.

Plain water should only be used as a last resort because it does not preserve the root cells well. Avoid wrapping the tooth in tissue or cloth, as dry storage can damage it.

Control bleeding and seek urgent care

Bleeding from the socket is common. Apply gentle pressure using a clean cloth or gauze for about 10 minutes to help stop it.

To reduce swelling and pain, apply a cold pack wrapped in a cloth to the cheek for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. For pain relief, paracetamol is usually safe if needed, but aspirin should be avoided in children.

Most importantly, seek dental care immediately. A dentist should see the patient within 30 to 60 minutes, as the chances of saving the tooth decrease significantly after the first hour.

What the dentist will do

At the dental clinic, the dentist will clean the socket and reinsert the tooth if it has not already been replaced. The tooth will then be stabilised by attaching it to neighbouring teeth using a small splint made of wire or resin. This splint usually remains in place for one to two weeks.

Antibiotics may be prescribed to prevent infection, and a tetanus shot might be recommended if the injury occurred in a dirty environment. In many cases, a root canal treatment is performed about a week later to preserve the tooth.

Regular follow-up visits are also important so the dentist can monitor healing and detect any complications, such as root damage or infection.

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