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Frequently asked questions about jaw or dental cysts

This leaflet has been designed to improve your understanding of any forthcoming treatment and contains answers to many of the commonly asked questions. If you have any other questions that the leaflet does not answer or would like further explanation please ask.

What are dental cysts?

A cyst is a sac of tissue that has either fluid or soft material inside it. Cysts can form in a wide range of tissues including in the face and mouth (including the jaws). Some can form next to or around teeth and these are called dental cysts. They can be sterile or become infected.

Why do dental cysts form?

Dental cysts can form at the tip of the roots of dead teeth. They can also form around the crowns (and roots) of buried teeth. Most cysts form because the teeth they are attached to have died due to infection or trauma. Others form because of a mistake in the way the teeth have developed (including being unable to grow into the mouth properly). Rarely, dental cysts can be part of a genetic syndrome that has other symptoms (eg Gorlin's syndrome). Do ask more if you have a jaw cyst.

Can I develop more than one dental cyst?

Any teeth can develop a jaw cyst. Mostly people will only have one at a time, but some people are more susceptible to developing them either because of the condition of their teeth or because they have an inherited condition that has dental cysts as part of its features.

What problems can dental cysts cause?

Dental and jaw cysts can cause several problems but some remain undetected for months or even years. Many cause problems when:

- They become infected causing pain and / or swelling.
- They slowly replace bone of the jaws and weaken them.
- They press against other teeth and structures.
- They may prevent the normal function of the mouth and teeth.

How would I know if I have a dental cyst?

You might find out that you have a dental cyst when it becomes infected (an abscess).

Your dentist might tell you that you have a cyst after looking at a dental or jaw X-ray: cysts can be seen as darker areas like 'holes' in the bone.

Some people only find out they have a cyst when their jaw breaks after trauma (because the jaw is weakened by a large cyst).

What is the difference between a dental cyst and a dental abscess?

Abscesses are localised acute infections, which require immediate attention from your dentist or doctor. It is rare not to know you have an abscess - they are usually associated with acute pain (they hurt a lot!), swelling (eg. your gum or even face and cheek swells up) and sometimes an unpleasant smell or taste in the mouth. Abscesses can form inside or near dental cysts, which is where the confusion can occur.

Dental cysts aren't necessarily infected and can grow slowly for many months or even years without any or many symptoms.

How can I prevent dental cysts from forming?

Teeth that remain alive, rarely have cysts develop next to them. If the nerves in a tooth die (as a result of an infection or trauma), your dentist will want to remove the nerve and

fill its space in the root with a root canal filling to stop it becoming a source of infection. If this is successful, the tissues next to the root shouldn't be stimulated to form a cyst (or an abscess).

For the health of your teeth and the rest of your mouth, it is a good idea to visit a dentist regularly for a check-up. Sometimes, your dentist will be concerned that you might have a buried tooth and will want to take X-rays to check for its position and state of health. Often, it is a good idea for the dentist to carefully watch or even remove buried teeth; this can either detect cysts when they are small and/or prevent the formation of cysts by removing the potential starting point.

How are dental cysts treated?

The treatment recommended for a jaw or dental cyst depends on the location, type and size of cyst. Ideally, we want to remove the cyst tissue to:

- Examine it.
- Help the tissues to repair themselves.
- To prevent another cyst from forming.

This is often done in combination with other treatment to the tooth (or teeth) associated with the cyst.

What are the options if I have a cyst at the end of dead roots?

If it is a small cyst at the end of a dead root, treatment of the dead root alone might allow the cyst to repair itself slowly. Some cysts at the end of roots (particularly on front teeth) might need to be removed to help the root treatment be more successful.

For further advice and information, please see:

- The British Association of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons: www.baoms.org.uk