

Dental Specialist Glossary — Common Terms Explained

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Description:

Patient-friendly glossary of common dental terms — from abscess to wisdom teeth. Understand what your dentist or specialist is talking about.

Details:

Dental terminology can be confusing. When your dentist or specialist uses technical terms, it is natural to feel uncertain about what they mean. This glossary is designed to help patients understand the most common dental terms in plain language.

Whether you have been given a treatment plan you want to understand better, or you are simply curious about dental terminology, this guide covers the key terms you are likely to encounter.

A

****Abscess**** A collection of pus caused by a bacterial infection. A dental abscess can form at the tip of a tooth's root (periapical abscess) or in the gum tissue beside a tooth (periodontal abscess). Abscesses are usually painful and require prompt treatment, which may include drainage, antibiotics, root canal treatment, or tooth extraction.

****Abutment**** A connector piece used in dental implant treatment. The abutment attaches to the implant (which is embedded in the bone) and supports the crown, bridge, or denture on top. Think of it as the link between the implant below the gum and the visible tooth above.

****AHPRA**** The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. AHPRA is the national body responsible for registering and regulating health practitioners in Australia, including dentists and dental specialists. You can check any dental practitioner's registration status on the AHPRA website.

****Aligner**** A clear, removable tray used in orthodontic treatment to gradually move teeth into their desired positions. Clear aligners are an alternative to traditional braces and are popular with adult patients because they are nearly invisible when worn.

****Alveolar bone**** The bone that surrounds and supports the roots of the teeth. This bone can be lost as a result of gum disease (periodontitis), and its preservation is a key goal of periodontal treatment.

****Apicoectomy**** A minor surgical procedure performed by an endodontist in which the tip (apex) of a tooth's root is removed along with any infected tissue. An apicoectomy is typically performed when standard root canal treatment has not resolved an infection at the root tip.

B

****Bitewing (X-ray)**** A type of dental X-ray that shows the upper and lower back teeth in a single image. Bitewing X-rays are commonly used to detect decay between teeth and to check the bone levels around teeth.

****Bone graft**** A procedure to rebuild or augment bone that has been lost. In dentistry, bone grafting is often performed before dental implant placement when there is not enough natural bone to support the implant. The graft material may come from the patient's own body, a donor source, or a synthetic material.

****Braces**** Fixed orthodontic appliances consisting of brackets bonded to the teeth and connected by archwires. Braces apply gentle, continuous pressure to move teeth into their correct positions over time. They may be metal, ceramic (tooth-coloured), or lingual (placed on the inside surfaces of the teeth).

****Bridge**** A fixed dental restoration that replaces one or more missing teeth by attaching artificial teeth to the natural teeth or implants on either side of the gap. Unlike a denture, a bridge is cemented in place and cannot be removed by the patient.

****Bruxism**** The habit of grinding or clenching the teeth, often during sleep. Bruxism can cause tooth wear, jaw pain, headaches, and damage to dental restorations. Treatment may include a custom-made night guard (occlusal splint), stress management, and monitoring for damage.

C

****Calculus (tartar)**** Hardened dental plaque that has mineralised on the tooth surface. Unlike plaque, which can be removed by brushing, calculus must be removed by a dental professional using specialised instruments. Calculus buildup contributes to gum disease.

****CBCT (Cone-Beam Computed Tomography)**** A type of three-dimensional X-ray that provides detailed images of the teeth, jaws, nerves, and surrounding structures. CBCT is used for implant planning, assessing complex root canal anatomy, evaluating jaw pathology, and surgical planning.

****Cementum**** The thin layer of hard tissue that covers the root surfaces of teeth. Cementum helps anchor the tooth to the surrounding bone via the periodontal ligament.

****Composite resin**** A tooth-coloured filling material used to restore decayed, chipped, or broken teeth. Composite resin is bonded directly to the tooth and can be shaped and polished to match the surrounding teeth.

****Crown (dental)**** A restoration that covers the entire visible portion of a tooth, restoring its shape, strength, and appearance. Crowns are used when a tooth is too damaged to be repaired with a filling. They can be made from porcelain, ceramic, metal alloys, or a combination of materials.

****Crown lengthening**** A periodontal surgical procedure that removes gum tissue and/or bone to expose more of the tooth structure. Crown lengthening may be performed for restorative reasons (to provide enough tooth surface for a crown to attach to) or for cosmetic reasons (to correct a "gummy" smile).

****Crossbite**** A bite problem where one or more upper teeth sit inside the lower teeth rather than outside them, as they normally should. Crossbites can affect front or back teeth and may involve a single tooth or multiple teeth. They are typically corrected with orthodontic treatment.

D

****Decay (dental caries)**** The destruction of tooth structure caused by acids produced by bacteria in dental plaque. Decay progresses from the outer enamel through to the inner dentine and, if untreated, can reach the dental pulp (nerve), causing pain and infection.

****Dental implant**** A titanium post that is surgically placed into the jawbone to replace the root of a missing tooth. Once the implant has integrated with the bone (a process called osseointegration), a crown, bridge, or denture can be attached to it. Implants are considered one of the most reliable methods of replacing missing teeth.

****Dental pulp**** The soft tissue inside the centre of a tooth, containing nerves, blood vessels, and connective tissue. When the pulp becomes infected or inflamed (often due to deep decay or trauma), root canal treatment may be needed.

****Denture**** A removable replacement for missing teeth. A complete (full) denture replaces all teeth in an arch, while a partial denture replaces some teeth and is retained by clasps that attach to remaining natural teeth. Dentures can also be supported by dental implants for improved stability.

****Diastema**** A gap or space between two teeth, most commonly between the upper front teeth. Diastemas can be closed with orthodontic treatment, veneers, bonding, or crowns, depending on the patient's preference and the underlying cause.

E

****Enamel**** The hard, white outer layer of the tooth crown. Enamel is the hardest substance in the human body and protects the underlying dentine from decay. Once enamel is lost, it cannot regenerate.

****Endodontics**** The dental specialty concerned with the study and treatment of the dental pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. Endodontists perform root canal treatment, retreatment of failed root canals, and surgical procedures such as apicoectomies.

****Extraction**** The removal of a tooth. Extractions may be straightforward (where the tooth is visible and can be removed with dental instruments) or surgical (where the tooth is impacted, broken, or requires removal of surrounding bone). Wisdom tooth removal is one of the most common types of surgical extraction.

F

****Filling**** A restoration used to repair a tooth that has been damaged by decay, wear, or fracture. Fillings can be made from various materials, including composite resin (tooth-coloured), amalgam (silver-coloured), glass ionomer, or ceramic.

****Fissure sealant**** A thin, protective coating applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth (usually molars) to help prevent decay. Sealants fill the natural grooves and pits in the tooth surface where bacteria tend to accumulate. They are most commonly applied to children's permanent molars.

****Fluoride**** A mineral that strengthens tooth enamel and helps prevent decay. Fluoride is found in most Australian tap water, many toothpastes, and can be applied professionally as a concentrated gel or varnish during dental visits.

G

****Gingiva (gums)**** The soft tissue that surrounds and supports the teeth. Healthy gums are firm and pink and do not bleed when brushed. Changes in gum colour, swelling, or bleeding may indicate gum

disease.

****Gingivitis**** The earliest stage of gum disease, characterised by inflammation of the gums. Gingivitis is caused by plaque buildup along the gum line and is reversible with improved oral hygiene and professional cleaning. If left untreated, gingivitis can progress to periodontitis.

****Gum disease**** See ***Gingivitis*** and ***Periodontitis***. Gum disease is a general term for inflammatory conditions affecting the gums and, in more advanced stages, the bone that supports the teeth.

****Gum recession**** The process by which the gum tissue pulls back from the tooth, exposing more of the tooth or its root. Gum recession can be caused by gum disease, aggressive brushing, teeth grinding, or natural ageing. Treatment may include soft tissue grafting.

I

****Impacted tooth**** A tooth that has failed to emerge fully through the gum into its normal position in the dental arch. Wisdom teeth are the most commonly impacted teeth, but canines and other teeth can also be affected. Impacted teeth may need to be surgically removed or, in some cases, orthodontically guided into position.

****Impression**** A mould or scan of the teeth used to create models for planning treatment or fabricating dental restorations. Traditional impressions use a putty-like material; digital impressions use an intraoral scanner to create a three-dimensional computer model.

****Inlay and Onlay**** Custom-made restorations that fit within (inlay) or over (onlay) the chewing surface of a back tooth. Inlays and onlays are typically made from porcelain or composite resin and are used when a tooth is too damaged for a filling but does not need a full crown.

M

****Malocclusion**** A misalignment of the teeth or an incorrect relationship between the upper and lower dental arches. Types of malocclusion include crowding, spacing, overbite, underbite, crossbite, and open bite. Malocclusion is the primary condition that orthodontic treatment addresses.

****Mouthguard (sports guard)**** A protective device worn over the teeth to prevent injury during sport or physical activity. Custom-made mouthguards, fabricated by a dental professional from an impression of the patient's teeth, provide a significantly better fit and protection than shop-bought varieties.

N

****Night guard (occlusal splint)**** A custom-made device worn during sleep to protect the teeth from the effects of grinding or clenching (bruxism). Night guards prevent tooth wear, reduce jaw muscle strain, and protect dental restorations from damage.

O

****Occlusion**** The way the upper and lower teeth come together when you bite. Normal occlusion means the teeth meet in a balanced, functional relationship. Problems with occlusion (malocclusion) can cause difficulty eating, jaw pain, and uneven tooth wear.

****Oral and maxillofacial surgery**** The dental specialty concerned with the surgical treatment of conditions affecting the mouth, jaws, face, and neck. Oral and maxillofacial surgeons perform

procedures including wisdom tooth removal, dental implant placement, corrective jaw surgery, bone grafting, and the management of oral pathology.

****Orthodontics**** The dental specialty focused on the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of dental and facial irregularities. Orthodontists use braces, aligners, and other appliances to move teeth and guide jaw growth, improving both function and appearance.

****Orthognathic surgery**** Corrective jaw surgery performed to reposition the upper jaw, lower jaw, or both to correct significant bite problems and facial imbalances that cannot be addressed with orthodontics alone. Orthognathic surgery is typically performed by an oral and maxillofacial surgeon in collaboration with an orthodontist.

****Osseointegration**** The process by which a dental implant fuses with the surrounding jawbone. Successful osseointegration creates a stable foundation for the implant to support a crown, bridge, or denture. This process typically takes several months.

****Overbite**** A vertical overlap where the upper front teeth cover too much of the lower front teeth when biting together. A moderate overbite is normal, but an excessive overbite can cause wear on the lower teeth and may be corrected with orthodontic treatment.

P

****Paediatric dentistry (Pedodontics)**** The dental specialty dedicated to the oral health care of infants, children, adolescents, and patients with special healthcare needs. Paediatric dentists have additional training in child development, behaviour management, and the unique dental conditions that affect young patients.

****Periapical**** Relating to the area around the tip (apex) of a tooth's root. A periapical abscess or periapical lesion is an infection at the root tip, usually resulting from an infected dental pulp. Periapical problems are treated by endodontists.

****Periodontics**** The dental specialty concerned with the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases affecting the gums (gingiva) and the supporting structures of the teeth (bone, cementum, and periodontal ligament). Periodontists also specialise in dental implant placement.

****Periodontitis**** An advanced form of gum disease in which infection and inflammation spread below the gum line, destroying the bone that supports the teeth. Periodontitis can lead to tooth loosening and tooth loss if not treated. Unlike gingivitis, the bone loss caused by periodontitis is generally not reversible, but treatment can stop further progression.

****Plaque**** A soft, sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on the surfaces of teeth. Plaque is the primary cause of tooth decay and gum disease. It can be removed by thorough daily brushing and flossing.

****Prosthodontics**** The dental specialty focused on the restoration and replacement of teeth. Prosthodontists design, fabricate, and fit crowns, bridges, veneers, dentures, and implant-supported restorations. They often manage complex cases involving the rehabilitation of multiple teeth or the entire dentition.

****Pulpotomy and Pulpectomy**** Procedures that involve removing part (pulpotomy) or all (pulpectomy) of the dental pulp. In children, a pulpotomy is commonly performed on baby teeth with deep decay, removing the infected portion of the pulp while preserving the healthy root pulp. A pulpectomy removes all the pulp tissue and is similar to root canal treatment.

R

****Retainer**** A device worn after orthodontic treatment to hold the teeth in their new positions. Retainers can be removable (worn at night) or fixed (a thin wire bonded to the back of the front teeth). Wearing retainers as directed is essential to prevent teeth from shifting back toward their original positions.

****Root canal treatment**** A procedure to treat infection or inflammation within the dental pulp. The infected pulp is removed, the canal system inside the root is cleaned and shaped, and the space is sealed with a filling material. Root canal treatment saves the natural tooth and eliminates infection. It is performed by endodontists (root canal specialists) or, in straightforward cases, by general dentists.

****Root planing**** See **Scaling and root planing**.

S

****Scaling and root planing**** A deep cleaning procedure performed to treat gum disease. Scaling removes plaque and calculus from above and below the gum line, while root planing smooths the root surfaces to help the gums reattach to the teeth. This procedure is typically performed by a periodontist or dental hygienist and may require local anaesthesia.

****Sinus lift (sinus augmentation)**** A surgical procedure that adds bone to the upper jaw in the area of the premolar and molar teeth. A sinus lift raises the sinus membrane and places bone graft material beneath it, creating enough bone depth to support dental implants. This procedure is performed when the natural bone in the upper jaw has been lost due to tooth extraction or natural resorption.

T

****TMJ (Temporomandibular Joint)**** The jaw joint — the hinge that connects the lower jaw (mandible) to the skull. TMJ disorders (sometimes called TMD) can cause pain, clicking, locking, or difficulty opening the mouth. Treatment varies depending on the cause and may include splints, physiotherapy, medication, or, in rare cases, surgery.

U

****Underbite**** A bite problem where the lower front teeth sit in front of the upper front teeth. An underbite can be caused by the lower jaw growing too far forward, the upper jaw not growing enough, or a combination of both. Treatment may involve orthodontics, jaw surgery, or both.

V

****Veneer**** A thin shell of porcelain or composite resin that is bonded to the front surface of a tooth to improve its appearance. Veneers can change the colour, shape, size, or length of teeth and are commonly used to improve the appearance of front teeth that are discoloured, chipped, worn, or slightly misaligned.

W

****Wisdom teeth (third molars)**** The last teeth to emerge, usually appearing between the ages of 17 and 25. Wisdom teeth often become impacted (unable to fully emerge) due to insufficient space in the jaw. Impacted wisdom teeth may cause pain, infection, or damage to adjacent teeth and often require surgical removal.

X

****X-ray (dental radiograph)**** An image produced using a small amount of radiation to visualise structures inside and around the teeth. Dental X-rays help dentists and specialists detect problems that are not visible during a clinical examination, such as decay between teeth, bone loss, infections at root tips, and impacted teeth. Types include periapical X-rays, bitewing X-rays, panoramic X-rays (OPG), and three-dimensional CBCT scans.

Frequently Asked Questions

****Why do dentists use so many technical terms?**** Dental terminology allows practitioners to communicate precisely about conditions and treatments. However, we believe patients should always understand what is happening with their teeth. If your dentist or specialist uses a term you do not understand, please ask — we are always happy to explain.

****Is there a difference between a specialist term and a general term?**** Some dental terms are common across all areas of dentistry, while others are specific to particular specialties. This glossary covers both, and we have indicated which specialty is primarily associated with each term where relevant.

****Where can I learn more about a specific dental condition or treatment?**** Your specialist is always the best source of information about your specific situation. For general information, the Australian Dental Association (ADA) website provides patient-friendly resources on a wide range of dental topics.

****What if my dentist recommends something that is not in this glossary?**** This glossary covers the most common terms but is not exhaustive. If you encounter a term that is not listed here, ask your dentist or specialist to explain it — they will be happy to do so.