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What Is a Dry Socket?

by Sarah Carpenter

Permanent teeth get pulled for many reasons — damage from trauma or decay, severe gum disease or to make room for other teeth. When a tooth gets pulled, a blood clot usually forms in the tooth's socket, and your dentist places gauze into it to stop the bleeding. Occasionally, there are complications - one of them is called a dry socket. This article will provide a high-level overview of dry sockets, what they are, what causes them, the associated health risks, and how to prevent and treat them.

What Is a Dry Socket?

[Dry socket is condition](#) that can occur after a tooth is extracted. After extraction, your dentist will place a piece of gauze over the extraction site and ask you to close down on it in order to slow bleeding so a blood clot can form. These clots become scabs and are a healthy aspect of recovery because they promote healing. A dry socket occurs when the blood clot that forms over your socket moves or doesn't form at all; leaving bone and nerves exposed. Occurring more often on the lower jaw than the upper jaw, it's a painful condition that delays healing of the surgical site.

Dry Socket Causes

Research is still being done on [what causes a dry socket to develop](#). Estrogen production might make women more prone to them than men because the hormone is known to dissolve blood clots. Other possible risk factors include:

- Too much force used at the time of tooth extraction.
- An infection where the blood clot forms.
- Taking birth control (because it contains estrogen).

Additionally, anything that dislodges the blood clot from your extraction site can increase your risk for dry socket, including:

- Drinking with a straw after tooth removal.
- Smoking (exhaling smoke can dislodge the blood clot).
- Swishing fluids in your mouth too vigorously.

Health Risks Associated with a Dry Socket

The most common sign of dry socket is pain in the affected area. Typically occurring within 1 to 3 days of an extraction, the pain can be severe enough to interfere with normal activities. A dry socket rarely results in infection or serious complications. However potential complications can include delayed healing in the socket or progression to chronic bone infection (osteomyelitis). If your pain becomes severe and persistent, visit your dentist immediately. In case of an infection, your dentist can prescribe antibiotics to soothe the discomfort and remove the dry socket.

How To Prevent a Dry Socket

There are a [few things you and your dentist or oral surgeon can do](#) before and after your tooth extraction that will help prevent dry socket. First, be sure to seek out a dentist or oral surgeon with experience in tooth extractions. Next, if you smoke, try to stop before your extraction because smoking and using other tobacco products increases your risk of dry socket. Lastly, talk to your dentist or oral surgeon about any prescription or over-the-counter medications or supplements you're taking, as they may interfere with blood clotting.

After your extraction, you can help prevent dry socket by following your dentist's or oral surgeon's instructions on how to care for the wound. These instructions will likely include resting so your body can heal, taking pain medications as prescribed, drinking lots of water without using a straw (which can dislodge a blood clot), eating soft foods, chewing on the opposite side of your mouth from the surgery site, keeping your mouth clean by rinsing with warm saltwater a few times a day and avoiding tobacco use.

In addition, your dentist or oral surgeon will take a number of steps to ensure proper healing of the socket and to prevent dry socket. These can include using antibacterial mouthwashes or gels immediately before and after surgery, taking oral antibiotics (particularly if you have a compromised immune system), applying antiseptic solutions to the wound and putting medicated dressings on the socket after surgery.

Dry Socket Treatment

Treatment of dry socket focuses on reducing symptoms — particularly pain. Flushing out the socket can remove any food particles or debris that may contribute to pain or infection. Medicated dressings packed in the socket can provide relatively fast pain relief. Over-the-counter pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications can also reduce pain. Your dentist or oral surgeon may prescribe you a pain reliever. Finally, good self-care can help — flushing the socket at home and preventing the socket from collecting debris are self-care practices that can promote healing and eliminate pain.

West Coast Dental Can Help

If you're having any issues with a permanent tooth, we can help. Find the right practitioner for you at West Coast Dental. Our specialists and general dentists are ready to serve you and your dental needs. [Schedule an appointment with us today.](#)

Sarah Carpenter is a freelance writer whose portfolio spans the industries of healthcare, higher education and entertainment. Find out more at [her website](#).

References

American Dental Association — [Dry Socket](#)

Cleveland Clinic — [Dry Socket](#)

Mayo Clinic — [Dry Socket](#)