

A guide to dental terminology



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The more you know the better you can care for your teeth

Does it ever seem as if your dentist is explaining your procedure in a foreign language?

This guide can help you make sense of commonly used dental terms.

Teeth

Bicuspid/premolars — the teeth with two rounded points located between the eye teeth (cuspid) and the molars.

Centrals/laterals — the four front teeth.

Cusp — the pointed or rounded part of a tooth's biting surface.

Cuspid — the teeth near the front of the mouth that come to a single point. Sometimes called the "eye teeth" or "canines."

Molars — teeth with a broad chewing surface for grinding food, located in the back of the mouth.

Endodontics

Treatment of the root and nerve of the tooth.

Periapical — the area surrounding the end of a tooth root.

Post and core — an anchor placed in the tooth root following a root canal to strengthen the tooth and help hold a crown (cap) in place.

Pulp — the blood vessels and nerve tissue inside a tooth.

Root canal treatment — the removal of the pulp tissue of a tooth due to decay or injury.

Orthodontics

Straightening or moving misaligned teeth and/or jaws with braces and/or surgery.

Malocclusion — incorrect position of biting or chewing surfaces of the upper and lower teeth.

Retainer — a device used to stabilize teeth following orthodontic treatment.

Pedodontics

Treatment of children.

Nursing bottle syndrome — severe decay in baby teeth due to sleeping with a bottle of milk or juice. The drink's natural sugars combine with bacteria in the mouth to produce acid that decays teeth.

Pedodontist/pediatric dentist — a specialist who treats children from birth through adolescence.

Sealant — a thin plastic material used to cover the biting surface of a child's tooth to prevent tooth decay.

Periodontics

Treatment of gums, tissue and bone that supports the teeth.

Gingivitis — an inflammation of the gums surrounding the teeth caused by a buildup of plaque or food particles.

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Periodontitis/gum disease — chronic inflammation and destruction of supporting bone and tissue membrane around the roots of teeth.

Root planing — a treatment of periodontal disease that involves scraping the roots of a tooth to remove bacteria and tartar.

Prosthodontics

Replacement of missing teeth with artificial materials, such as a bridge or denture.

Bridges — nonremovable tooth replacements attached to adjoining natural teeth when one or a few teeth are missing.

Dentures — removable artificial teeth in a plastic base that rests directly on the gums. A denture may be complete or partial depending on the number of missing natural teeth.

Implant — a support for a bridge or denture that has been surgically placed into bone.

Overdenture — a prosthetic device supported by implants or the roots of at least two natural teeth to provide better stability for the denture.

Pontic — the portion of a dental bridge that replaces missing teeth.

Restorations

Replacement of missing or damaged tooth structure with artificial materials.

Amalgam — a silver filling. Used for more than a century, amalgam fillings are proven to be safe, cost-effective and durable.

Cast restoration — a procedure that uses a model of the tooth (an impression) to make a metal casting which replaces missing parts. Example: a crown.

Crown/jacket/cap — the artificial covering of a tooth with metal, porcelain or porcelain fused to metal. Crowns cover teeth weakened by decay or severely damaged or chipped.

Inlay — a solid filling cast to fit the missing portion of the tooth and cemented into place. An onlay covers one or more tooth cusps.

Resin/composite — tooth-colored filling material used primarily for front teeth. Although cosmetically superior, it is less durable than other materials.

Other dental terms

Attrition — the normal wearing down of the surface of a tooth from chewing.

Bleaching — a technique that lightens the color of heavily stained teeth.

Bonding — a technique to bind a filling or filling material to a tooth. Bonding materials may be used to repair chipped, cracked, misshapen or discolored teeth or to fill in a gap between teeth.

Bruxism — involuntary clenching or grinding of the teeth.

Caries — tooth decay, which leads to a cavity.

Facing — a plastic or porcelain surface placed on the front of a tooth or crown for a natural appearance.

Impacted tooth — a tooth beneath the gum tissue that lies against another tooth, under bone or soft tissue, which is unlikely to grow out on its own.

Laminate veneer — a thin plastic or porcelain shell applied to the front of a tooth to restore, strengthen or improve its appearance.

Plaque — a bacteria-containing substance that collects on the surface of teeth. Plaque can cause decay and gum irritation when it is not removed by daily brushing and flossing.

Prophylaxis — a professional cleaning to remove plaque, calculus (mineralized plaque) and stains to help prevent dental disease.