

Keep sports safe—wear a mouthguard

When pulling together your sports equipment, don't forget about getting a mouthguard. Whether you're participating in organized sports or are a weekend warrior, you should think about the importance of protecting your mouth.

A properly fitted mouthguard, or mouth protector, is a key piece of athletic gear that can help protect your smile. People typically think about wearing mouthguards in contact sports, such as football, basketball, boxing, lacrosse or hockey, but the risk of experiencing an oral injury also exists in noncontact sports, such as gymnastics, baseball or skateboarding. Mouthguards cushion blows that might otherwise cause broken teeth and injuries to the lips, tongue, face or jaw.

TYPES OF MOUTHGUARDS

Three types of mouthguards are available:

- ready-made stock mouthguards;
- mouth-formed boil-and-bite mouthguards;
- custom-made mouthguards.

All three mouthguards provide some protection, but they vary in cost, comfort and durability. Stock mouthguards can be bought in most sporting goods stores but come in limited sizes (usually small, medium and large). Like stock mouthguards, mouth-formed—or boil-and-bite—mouthguards are available at sporting goods stores and come in limited sizes. A boil-and-bite mouthguard offers a more personalized fit in that you soften it in boiling water and then bite into it to shape it to your teeth. Your dentist can make a custom mouthguard that conforms to your mouth, offering a better fit than that of the others.

Store-bought mouthguards are inexpensive, but because they are intended to fit a variety of mouths, they tend to be less comfortable than are custom-made mouthguards. In addition, the materials used to make store-bought mouthguards are not as durable as those used in the dental office for the custom-made versions.

The most effective mouthguard is tear resistant and comfortable. It should fit properly in your mouth without restricting your speech or breathing. A good mouthguard should be durable and easy to clean.

Typically, a mouthguard covers only the upper teeth, but some activities may call for protection of the lower teeth as well. Talk with your dentist about your personal needs.

CHOOSING A MOUTHGUARD

When looking for a mouthguard, you might consider several factors:

- Is your dentition changing? Do you still have primary teeth? Are you waiting for permanent teeth to erupt to fill in your smile?
- What sport are you playing? At what level? Are you tossing the ball around with friends or will you be playing in a competitive league?
- Have you had any special dental treatment, such as placement of crowns or braces, that might require additional protection?

Your dentist is in the best position to counsel you about your specific situation and can be a great resource when you are looking for a mouthguard.

CARING FOR YOUR MOUTHGUARD

Whether store bought or custom made, your mouthguard can be cared for easily.

- Before and after each use, rinse it with cool water or a mouthrinse. You also can clean your mouthguard with toothpaste and a toothbrush.
- Store and transport your mouthguard in a sturdy container that has vents to allow air circulation.
- To keep the mouthguard from losing its shape, avoid exposing it to high temperatures, such as in hot water, on hot surfaces or in direct sunlight.
- Do not chew on or cut pieces off your mouthguard.
- Check your mouthguard regularly for tears or holes and to make sure the fit isn't too loose. In addition to making your mouthguard less effective, this kind of wear can irritate your gums, lips or cheek lining.
- Schedule regular dental visits and bring your mouthguard so that your dentist can make sure it still fits properly and is in good condition.

It is never too early to start wearing a mouthguard. As soon as you begin to look into sports for you or your child, talk with your dentist. Good habits start early, and use of a mouthguard by children and teenagers will promote and reinforce use later in life. ■

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