

Mouthguards

If you play a contact sport, and a lot of Aussies do, you risk injuring your teeth.

Many sports have risk of contact and therefore serious dental injury. These sorts of injuries are often difficult to treat, and often involve a lifetime of expense.



The damage done

Mouthguards can protect you from some serious sporting injuries, such as broken jaws, fractured, cracked or knocked-out teeth, cut lips and tongues.

And you don't just have to be playing obvious contact sports like rugby union, rugby league, AFL, hockey and boxing to sustain those kinds of injuries. Even non-contact sports like cricket, basketball, netball, touch football, skateboarding and soccer, carry a real risk of accidental collision, and resulting dental trauma.

How a mouthguard works

Mouthguards, also called mouth protectors, help cushion a blow to the face, minimizing the risk of broken teeth and injuries to your lips, tongue, face or jaw. They typically cover the upper teeth and are a great way to protect the soft tissues of your tongue, lips and cheek lining. "Your top teeth take the brunt of trauma because they stick out more," says Dr. Thomas Long, a private practice dentist and team dentist for the Carolina Hurricanes professional hockey team. "Your bottom teeth are a little more protected because they are further back."

A custom-fitted mouthguard works by absorbing and spreading the impact of the damaging blow, and is fabricated based on an impression of your teeth and jaw taken by your dentist.

A mouthguard that is custom-fitted by your dentist is far superior to an over-the-counter mouthguard because it's specially designed to fit the exact contours of your mouth, is resilient, balances your bite and allows speech and normal breathing. If properly used, stored, and checked by your dentist every year, a custom-fitted mouthguard should last several seasons.

In contrast, self-fitted, over-the-counter mouthguards, which include what are commonly known as boil-and-bite mouthguards, should not be used. They do not protect the teeth, are loosely fitted, impede breathing and speaking, and can even wedge in the back of the throat at impact which could be life threatening.

Wearing a custom-fitted mouthguard

Custom-fitted mouthguards, by virtue of their exact fit, let you talk normally, don't restrict your breathing and stay firmly in place, allowing you to concentrate on playing the sport you love. You should consider it a mandatory part of your sporting equipment, no matter your age or experience.

To keep your mouthguard in tip-top working order, you'll need to keep it out of the sun, wash it in cold water after use, keep on the supplied plastic model cast and get your dentist to make sure it's still OK when you go in for your regular check-ups.

Only dental professionals can design and manufacture a custom-fitted mouthguard that provides adequate protection.

For tips on dealing with dental trauma, visit [Dental Trauma and First Aid \(https://www.ada.org.au/Your-Dental-Health/Home\)](https://www.ada.org.au/Your-Dental-Health/Home).

When should you wear a mouthguard?

When it comes to protecting your mouth, a mouthguard is an essential piece of athletic gear that should be part of your standard equipment from an early age.

While collision and contact sports, such as boxing, are higher-risk sports for the mouth, any athlete may experience a dental injury in non-contact activities too, such as gymnastics and skating.

Types of mouthguards

The best mouthguard is one that has been custom made for your mouth by your dentist. However, if you can't afford a custom-made mouthguard, you should still wear a stock mouthguard or a boil-and-bite mouthguard from the drugstore. Learn more about each option:

Custom-made: These are made by your dentist for you personally. They are more expensive than the other versions because they are individually created for fit and comfort.

Boil and bite: These mouth protectors can be bought at many sporting goods stores and drugstores and may offer a better fit than stock mouth protectors. They are first softened in water (boiled), then inserted and allowed to adapt to the shape of your mouth. Always follow the manufacturers' instructions. 'CustMbite MVP' and 'CustMbite Pro' are a boil and bite mouthguards that have earned the ADA Seal of Acceptance.

Stock: These are inexpensive and come pre-formed, ready to wear. Unfortunately, they often don't fit very well. They can be bulky and can make breathing and talking difficult.

Protecting your braces

A properly fitted mouthguard may be especially important for people who wear braces or have fixed bridge work. A blow to the face could damage the brackets or other fixed orthodontic appliances. A mouthguard also provides a barrier between the braces and your cheek or lips, which will help you avoid injuries to your gums and cheeks.

Talk to your dentist or orthodontist about selecting a mouthguard that will provide the right protection. Although some mouthguards only cover the upper teeth, your dentist or orthodontist may suggest that you use a mouthguard on the lower teeth if you have braces on these teeth.

If you have a retainer or other removable appliance, do not wear it during any contact sports.

Mouthguard care and replacement

Talk to your dentist about when is the right time to replace your mouthguard, but replace it immediately if it shows sign of wear, is damaged or ill fitting. Teens and children may need to replace their mouthguards more often because their mouths are still growing and changing.

Between games, it's important to keep your mouthguard clean and dry. Here are some tips for making sure your mouthguard is always ready to go:

Rinse before and after each use or brush with a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Regularly clean the mouthguard in cool, soapy water. Then, rinse it thoroughly.

During your regular dental check-ups, bring your mouthguard for an evaluation. Your dentist may also be able to give it a thorough cleaning.

Store and transport the mouthguard in a sturdy container that has vents so it can dry and keep bacteria from growing.

Never leave the mouthguard in the sun or in hot water.

Check fit and for signs of wear and tear to see if it needs replacing.

Some mouthguards have fallen victim to family pets, who see them as chew toys. Store your mouthguard and case somewhere your pet cannot get to it.

More information / further reading:

Sports Medicine Australia – Dental Injuries

<http://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2018/04/MouthGuard.pdf>