

# Dental Terms Glossary



*Plain Language Definitions for Patients, Families & Support Teams*

This glossary explains common words and abbreviations (short forms of words) you may hear at the dental office. Each term is written in plain language so it is easy to understand. If you hear a word that is not listed here, it is always okay to ask your dental team to explain it.

**Tip: You can bring this sheet to your appointment. Point to any word you want to talk about.**

## Table of Contents

- People at the Dental Office ..... Page 1
- Common Dental Terms ..... Page 2
- Common Treatments ..... Page 3
- Numbing & Comfort ..... Page 4
- Communication & Consent ..... Page 5
- Tools & Equipment ..... Page 6
- Common Acronyms ..... Page 7
- After Your Visit (Post-Procedure) ..... Page 7

People at the Dental Office	
<b>Dentist</b>	The doctor who takes care of your teeth and mouth. They check for problems and do treatments.
<b>Dental Hygienist</b>	A trained helper who cleans your teeth and checks your gums.
<b>Dental Assistant</b>	A person who helps the dentist during your appointment. They hand tools and take X-rays.
<b>Orthodontist</b>	A dentist who specializes in straightening teeth. They use braces or clear aligners.
<b>Oral Surgeon</b>	A dentist who does operations on the mouth, like removing teeth or placing implants.
<b>Periodontist</b>	A dentist who specializes in treating gum disease and caring for the gums.

## Common Dental Terms

<b>Cavity</b>	A small hole in a tooth caused by germs eating away at the tooth. Also called tooth decay.
<b>Plaque</b>	A sticky, clear coating of germs that builds up on your teeth every day. It needs to be brushed off.
<b>Tartar</b>	Hardened plaque that sticks to teeth and cannot be brushed off at home. The hygienist removes it with special tools. Also called calculus.
<b>Enamel</b>	The hard outer shell that protects your tooth. It is the strongest part of your body.
<b>Gum / Gingiva</b>	The pink area that surrounds and holds your teeth in place.
<b>Gum Disease (Gingivitis / Periodontitis)</b>	When gums get red, swollen, or bleed because of too much plaque. Gingivitis is the mild form; periodontitis is more serious.
<b>Pulp</b>	The soft inside of your tooth that contains nerves and blood vessels. Sometimes called the nerve.
<b>Crown (tooth part)</b>	The part of the tooth you can see above the gum line.
<b>Root</b>	The bottom part of the tooth that holds it in the jawbone — you cannot see this part.

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Common Treatments	
<b>Cleaning</b>	A routine visit where the hygienist removes plaque and tartar and polishes your teeth.
<b>Filling</b>	A repair for a cavity. The dentist removes the unhealthy part of the tooth and fills the space with special material.
<b>Extraction</b>	Removing a tooth. The dentist wiggles the tooth loose and removes it.
<b>Root Canal</b>	A treatment to save a tooth that has an infected nerve inside. The dentist cleans out the inside of the tooth and seals it.
<b>Crown (dental cap)</b>	A covering placed over a tooth to protect it and make it strong again. It looks like a real tooth.
<b>Bridge</b>	A replacement for a missing tooth. It is connected to the teeth on either side to fill the gap.
<b>Implant</b>	A metal base placed in the bone where a tooth is missing. A crown is placed on top so it looks and feels like a real tooth.
<b>Fluoride Treatment</b>	A mineral put on teeth to make them stronger and help prevent cavities. Also called fluoride.
<b>Sealant</b>	A thin coating painted on the back teeth to protect them from cavities.

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## Numbing & Comfort

<b>Local Anesthetic</b>	Special medication that makes part of your mouth go to sleep so you do not feel pain during a procedure. Sometimes called numbing medicine.
<b>Novocaine</b>	A common brand name for local anesthetic (numbing medicine). People often use this word for any numbing shot.
<b>Numbing / Numb</b>	When a part of your mouth cannot feel anything. It may feel tingly or heavy. This wears off after a few hours.
<b>Nitrous Oxide</b>	A safe gas you breathe through a small mask that helps you feel calm and relaxed. Sometimes called laughing gas.
<b>Sedation</b>	Medicine that helps you feel very relaxed or sleepy during a procedure. There are different levels — from mild to full sleep.
<b>General Anesthesia</b>	Medicine that puts you in a deep sleep so you feel nothing during a procedure. Used for more complex treatments.

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## Communication & Consent

<b>Consent</b>	When you or your legal guardian agrees to a treatment after learning about it. You have the right to say yes or no.
<b>Assent</b>	When you (the patient) agree to a treatment, even if someone else also gives legal consent for you.
<b>Informed Consent</b>	Agreeing to a treatment after the dentist explains what it is, why it is needed, and what might happen.
<b>AAC (Augmentative &amp; Alternative Communication)</b>	Tools and methods that help people communicate without speaking. Examples include picture boards, tablets, and speech devices.
<b>Communication Device</b>	A tool — like a tablet or special board — that helps someone share their needs and feelings.
<b>Stop Signal / Break Signal</b>	A way you agree with your dentist to ask for a pause — like raising your hand. You can use this any time during treatment.
<b>Medical Immobilization and Procedural Stabilization (MIPS)</b>	The application of protocols used to provide the clinician with the best scenario for a successful outcome of a clinical procedure that could not be completed with a patient that is unable or incapable of adhering to the recommendations provided by the clinician.

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<b>Tools &amp; Equipment</b>	
<b>X-Ray (Radiograph)</b>	A picture taken of your teeth and jaw using a special machine. It helps the dentist see what is happening inside the tooth and bone.
<b>Mold / Impression</b>	A soft material placed in your mouth that shapes to your teeth. It is used to make a model of your teeth.
<b>Suction</b>	A small tube placed in your mouth to remove water and saliva so you do not have to swallow it.
<b>Scaler</b>	A small tool the hygienist uses to remove tartar from your teeth. You may feel pressure or hear a scraping sound.
<b>Probe</b>	A thin tool used to gently measure the space between your teeth and gums.
<b>Retractor</b>	A tool that gently holds your cheek or lips back so the dentist can see inside your mouth.
<b>Gauze</b>	Soft cotton material the dentist may ask you to bite on after a tooth is removed to help stop bleeding.
<b>Dental Drill (Handpiece)</b>	(Handpiece)A small spinning tool the dentist uses to remove unhealthy parts of a tooth or shape a tooth for a crown. You will hear a buzzing sound and feel vibration.
<b>Digital Scan / Digital Impression</b>	A computer scan of your teeth used instead of a traditional mold. The dentist moves a small wand over your teeth to take pictures.
<b>Protective stabilization</b>	Gentle, supportive positioning of the patient's body, sometimes using a padded board or wrap (often called a papoose board), to allow care to be provided safely when a person's movement cannot otherwise be managed.
<b>Papoose Board</b>	A temporary medical stabilization board used to limit a patient's freedom of movement to decrease risk of injury while allowing safe completion of treatment.

## Common Acronyms

<b>IDD</b>	Intellectual and/or Developmental Disability. A term for conditions that affect learning, communication, or daily living skills.
<b>AAC</b>	Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Tools and strategies that help people communicate (see Communication section above).
<b>TMJ</b>	Temporomandibular Joint. The joint that connects your jaw to your skull. Pain here can make it hard to open your mouth wide.
<b>Rx</b>	Prescription. A written order from a dentist or doctor for medicine.

## After Your Visit (Post-Procedure)

<b>Sensitivity</b>	A feeling of discomfort or mild pain in a tooth when eating, drinking, or breathing in cool air. Common after fillings or cleanings and usually goes away in a few days.
<b>Healing</b>	The process of your body recovering after a procedure. Healing time is different for everyone.
<b>Soft Foods Diet</b>	Eating only soft foods (like yogurt, mashed potatoes, or soup) after certain procedures to protect your mouth while it heals.

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