



Mouth guards: Sports equipment that protects the smile

It's easy to take some things for granted until they're suddenly gone. Have you ever thought about how it would feel if you lost one or two of your front teeth? You'd probably avoid smiling. It would be uncomfortable talking with someone face-to-face. It wouldn't be easy pronouncing certain words. And how about eating an apple? Until your teeth are gone, you might not miss them.

Each year, thousands of teens get hurt on the playing field, the basketball court, or while skateboarding, biking or during other activities. Blows to the face in nearly every sport can injure your teeth, lips, cheeks and tongue.

A properly fitted mouth guard, or mouth protector, is an important piece of athletic gear that can protect your teeth and smile. You may have seen them used in contact sports, such as football, boxing, and ice hockey.

However, you don't have to be on the football field to benefit from a mouth guard. New findings in sports dentistry show that even in non-contact sports such as gymnastics, rollerblading, and field hockey, mouth guards help protect teeth. Many experts recommend that a mouth guard be worn for any recreational activity that poses a risk of injury to the mouth.

There are three types of mouth guards: The ready-made, or stock, mouth guard; the mouth-formed "boil and bite" mouth guard; and the custom-made mouth guard made by your dentist. All three mouth guards provide protection but vary in comfort and cost.

The most effective mouth guard should have several features:

- ✓ It should be resilient, tear resistant and comfortable
- ✓ It should fit properly, be durable and easy to clean
- ✓ It should not restrict your speech or breathing

Generally, a mouth guard covers only the upper teeth, but in some cases the dentist will instead make a mouth guard for the lower teeth. Your dentist can suggest the right mouth guard for you.

Here are some suggestions for taking good care of your mouth guard:

- ✓ Before and after each use, rinse it with cold water or with an antiseptic mouth rinse. You can clean it with toothpaste and a toothbrush, too.
- ✓ When it's not used, place your mouth guard in a firm, perforated container. This permits air circulation and helps prevent damage.
- ✓ Avoid high temperatures, such as hot water, hot surfaces or direct sunlight, which can distort the mouth guard.
- ✓ Check it for tears, holes and poor fit. A mouth guard that's torn or in bad shape can irritate your mouth and lessen the amount of protection it provides.
- ✓ Have regular dental checkups and bring your mouth guard along so the dentist can make sure it's still in good condition.

Don't take your teeth for granted. Protect your smile with a mouth guard.