Dental Dry Socket

In most dental patients, blood fills up the open tooth *socket* (hole) left after a dental *extraction* (a pulled tooth). The blood hardens (forms a clot) and protects the tooth socket while the gums grow over the top. Normally gums completely grow over and close an open extraction socket in a week or so. After 6 months, the hardened blood is replaced by bone that grows into the socket.

WHAT IS A DRY SOCKET

When blood does not fill up the extraction socket, or the blood clot is lost for some reason, the result is a dry socket. The gums cannot grow over the extraction socket because there's nothing to grow over, and the dry socket remains open. This open dry socket causes a constant, dull throbbing pain. A patient with a dry socket can often have foul smelling breath and a bad taste in the mouth. The dry socket pain may also cause ear pain.

A dry socket begins hurting about three days after oral surgery. It's called a dry socket because the hole, or socket, that the tooth used to fit into becomes dry. Unfortunately, the pain from a dry socket lasts about a week after it begins. The dental name for a dry socket is *acute (*sudden*) alveolar osteitis*. Acute means sudden onset. Alveolar is the name of the bone that supports teeth. Osteitis means inflamed bone. So, acute alveolar osteitis (dry socket) means sudden inflammation of the bone that supports a tooth.

CAUSES OF A DENTAL DRY SOCKET & PREVENTION

- Dentists do not know exactly what causes a dry socket.
- A dry socket seems to occur more with lower teeth than upper teeth, and more with females than males.
- A dry socket happens more often after difficult extractions. It may be that forceful pushing against the wall of the socket when the tooth is being removed causes the walls of the tooth socket to become crushed. This prevents bleeding into the socket because the blood vessels have been crushed closed. The lack of blood then causes the dry socket.
- Anything that can dislodge a forming blood clot can cause a dental dry socket.
- Forceful spitting or sucking through a straw can pull a blood clot completely out of the socket and cause a dry socket.
- Patients should wait at least a day before rinsing with warm salt water to avoid possibly dissolving the new blood clot, which can result in a dry socket. When salt water rinsing, spit gently to avoid pressure on the clot.
- Carbonated beverages should be avoided for fear they may bubble the clot out of the socket and cause a dry socket.
- Alcoholic drinks may *prematurely* (early) dry out the blood clot and cause a dry socket.
- Avoid smoking for a few days after dental extractions because smoking can disturb blood clot formation and cause a dry socket.

Patients who have recently had oral surgery should avoid anything that may irritate the extraction socket or anything that may cause the blood clot inside the extraction socket from being dislodged. Follow oral surgery *postoperative* (after operation) instructions carefully. Dry socket pain almost always goes away by itself after several days. Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.

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