

# A guide to dental terminology



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## The more you know the better you can care for your teeth

Does it ever seem as if your dentist is explaining your procedure in a foreign language?

This guide can help you make sense of commonly used dental terms.

### Teeth

**Bicuspid/premolars** — the teeth with two rounded points located between the eye teeth (cuspid) and the molars.

**Centrals/laterals** — the four front teeth.

**Cusp** — the pointed or rounded part of a tooth's biting surface.

**Cuspid** — the teeth near the front of the mouth that come to a single point. Sometimes called the "eye teeth" or "canines."

**Molars** — teeth with a broad chewing surface for grinding food, located in the back of the mouth.

### Endodontics

*Treatment of the root and nerve of the tooth.*

**Periapical** — the area surrounding the end of a tooth root.

**Post and core** — an anchor placed in the tooth root following a root canal to strengthen the tooth and help hold a crown (cap) in place.

**Pulp** — the blood vessels and nerve tissue inside a tooth.

**Root canal treatment** — the removal of the pulp tissue of a tooth due to decay or injury.

### Orthodontics

*Straightening or moving misaligned teeth and/or jaws with braces and/or surgery.*

**Malocclusion** — incorrect position of biting or chewing surfaces of the upper and lower teeth.

**Retainer** — a device used to stabilize teeth following orthodontic treatment.

### Pedodontics

*Treatment of children.*

**Nursing bottle syndrome** — severe decay in baby teeth due to sleeping with a bottle of milk or juice. The drink's natural sugars combine with bacteria in the mouth to produce acid that decays teeth.

**Pedodontist/pediatric dentist** — a specialist who treats children from birth through adolescence.

**Sealant** — a thin plastic material used to cover the biting surface of a child's tooth to prevent tooth decay.

### Periodontics

*Treatment of gums, tissue and bone that supports the teeth.*

**Gingivitis** — an inflammation of the gums surrounding the teeth caused by a buildup of plaque or food particles.

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**Periodontitis/gum disease** — chronic inflammation and destruction of supporting bone and tissue membrane around the roots of teeth.

**Root planing** — a treatment of periodontal disease that involves scraping the roots of a tooth to remove bacteria and tartar.

## Prosthodontics

*Replacement of missing teeth with artificial materials, such as a bridge or denture.*

**Bridges** — nonremovable tooth replacements attached to adjoining natural teeth when one or a few teeth are missing.

**Dentures** — removable artificial teeth in a plastic base that rests directly on the gums. A denture may be complete or partial depending on the number of missing natural teeth.

**Implant** — a support for a bridge or denture that has been surgically placed into bone.

**Overdenture** — a prosthetic device supported by implants or the roots of at least two natural teeth to provide better stability for the denture.

**Pontic** — the portion of a dental bridge that replaces missing teeth.

## Restorations

*Replacement of missing or damaged tooth structure with artificial materials.*

**Amalgam** — a silver filling. Used for more than a century, amalgam fillings are proven to be safe, cost-effective and durable.

**Cast restoration** — a procedure that uses a model of the tooth (an impression) to make a metal casting which replaces missing parts. Example: a crown.

**Crown/jacket/cap** — the artificial covering of a tooth with metal, porcelain or porcelain fused to metal. Crowns cover teeth weakened by decay or severely damaged or chipped.

**Inlay** — a solid filling cast to fit the missing portion of the tooth and cemented into place. An onlay covers one or more tooth cusps.

**Resin/composite** — tooth-colored filling material used primarily for front teeth. Although cosmetically superior, it is less durable than other materials.

## Other dental terms

**Attrition** — the normal wearing down of the surface of a tooth from chewing.

**Bleaching** — a technique that lightens the color of heavily stained teeth.

**Bonding** — a technique to bind a filling or filling material to a tooth. Bonding materials may be used to repair chipped, cracked, misshapen or discolored teeth or to fill in a gap between teeth.

**Bruxism** — involuntary clenching or grinding of the teeth.

**Caries** — tooth decay, which leads to a cavity.

**Facing** — a plastic or porcelain surface placed on the front of a tooth or crown for a natural appearance.

**Impacted tooth** — a tooth beneath the gum tissue that lies against another tooth, under bone or soft tissue, which is unlikely to grow out on its own.

**Laminate veneer** — a thin plastic or porcelain shell applied to the front of a tooth to restore, strengthen or improve its appearance.

**Plaque** — a bacteria-containing substance that collects on the surface of teeth. Plaque can cause decay and gum irritation when it is not removed by daily brushing and flossing.

**Prophylaxis** — a professional cleaning to remove plaque, calculus (mineralized plaque) and stains to help prevent dental disease.