Why Are Dental Health and Hygiene Important While Traveling?

Dental health is often given a low priority by governments, even in travelers' home countries. A high standard of dental hygiene is easy for a person to maintain at home, as a routine is usually developed. When a person is traveling, dental hygiene can take a low priority unless that routine is maintained by the traveler. Some simple precautions should be taken to avoid dental-related problems while traveling. A dental problem abroad has a great potential to interfere with a successful holiday or business trip, and finding dentists and obtaining dental treatment abroad can be time consuming.

How Do I Find Dental Clinics Overseas?

Dental care does not tend to be as accessible in the public health systems of many developing countries as it is in developed countries. Private clinics may be found; however, there may be language barriers to overcome. Before travel, it may be helpful for travelers to obtain recommendations for suitable dental treatment services at their destinations, particularly if they are prone to dental problems. Ideally, this recommendation should be given by their dentist, along with a letter outlining their dental history. If it is likely that dental treatment will be undertaken abroad, hepatitis B vaccination should be discussed with the traveler.

Once a person is traveling, recommendations concerning suitable dentists available for consultation while overseas may be obtained from foreign missions, hotels, private hospitals, and travel medicine centers. In addition, travel insurance and other agencies often provide a service to assist travelers in finding medical and dental care while overseas.

Does Travel Insurance Cover Dental Work?

Dental treatment is generally not free and, depending on the procedures required, can be quite expensive. Travel insurance provides some coverage against both medical and dental expenses incurred while overseas, in addition to other aspects of traveling misadventure. Maximum coverage should be obtained wherever available, as costs of private health care may be quite expensive. Also travelers should check that their travel insurance covers them for dental treatment as much as possible.

Travelers should also be advised to request and keep receipts of any dental or medical treatment while overseas, in case these expenses can be claimed back from a national health service or private health insurance fund. It is important to remember that travel insurance normally does not cover pre-existing health problems, which may include some dental problems of travelers. Some countries may have reciprocal arrangements concerning emergency medical and dental treatment.

Should I Get a Dental Checkup Before I Go?

Travelers should obtain a checkup before departure, if a routine dental checkup is needed. Travelers should avoid traveling with major dental problems. Dental problems can strike at the most inopportune time, and dental treatment may not be readily available at all their destinations. Travelers should also understand that there are some risks of disease transmission in dental surgeries abroad, particularly from contaminated instruments, although the risks are probably very small. In any event, suffering a dental problem while traveling can interfere with a trip.
Can Recent Dental Work Interfere with My Trip?

Recent dental work or oral surgery, dental caries, and loose fillings can cause pain for a traveler flying in unpressurized aircraft or scuba diving. This pain is attributed to air cavities in the amalgam, caries or soft tissues, which are subject to barotrauma on both ascent and descent. Travelers should be advised to get a dental checkup if it has been more than 6 months since their last one, or if they will be traveling for an extended period of time. It is also important for travelers to inform their dentists that they will be flying or diving immediately following their dental treatment. Generally, 24 hours should separate routine dental treatment and flying or diving. More involved surgery may require a recovery period of more than 2 weeks before diving. All divers should undergo regular dental checkups and preventive medicals to ensure that any dental work or appliances will not interfere with their safety while they are diving.

Can I Use Tap Water to Clean My Teeth While Traveling?

Tap water in a number of countries around the world does not meet international standards, even in some areas of developed countries. In some instances, reticulated water systems may not even be available for some adventure travelers. Hence, travelers should be critical of the quality of water while traveling, including that used for cleaning teeth. It is possible to contract a range of diarrheal and other diseases from contaminated water. Bottled drinking water or purified water should be used for cleaning teeth, unless it has been indicated that the tap water is safe to drink.

What If I Forget to Take My Toothbrush?

Travelers should take an adequate supply of toothbrushes, toothpaste and dental floss, as quality, price and availability of certain types of dental hygiene products may vary considerably abroad. Travelers should pack toothbrush, toothpaste, and dental floss, preferably in a separate waterproof container, in carry-on bags or back-pack when traveling, to ensure that these items are available when they are needed. This presumes that these travelers will be carrying drinking water or will have access to appropriate drinking water. Replacement toothbrushes and dental hygiene products may be available through airlines, major hotels, and airline club lounges, but again these may not be of the type or quality that is expected or normally used.

Do I Need Dietary Advice for Travel with Dental Problems?

Dietary advice needs to be given in the broader context of prevention of traveler’s diarrhea and dehydration. Travelers with dental problems, such as dentures or extensive fillings or tooth restorations, should avoid sticky foods, such as sticky toffee or confectionary, and hard foods, such as firm nuts. Travelers should avoid breaking hard seed pods with their teeth or opening packages or bottles with their teeth.

Fluid, semi-fluid and soft meals may be available as meal options on international flights and are of high nutritional value. They are often offered as small, frequent meals. They are appropriate and recommended for those who have problems chewing or swallowing following an accident, surgery or stroke, or for those with dental problems.

What If I Get a Sore Tooth While I Am Traveling?

Tooth pain is an indicator of dental problems and should not be ignored. For travelers, tooth pain should be regarded as a relatively common complaint, so they should be advised that travel medical kits contain a mild pain reliever acceptable to the authorities at their destination. Travelers who are taking pain relievers with them for dental problems should have these included in a doctor’s letter for all their medications taken abroad.

What Happens If My Denture Becomes Damaged or Broken While I Am Traveling?

A dental prosthesis is any appliance placed in the mouth for dental purposes, ranging from a capped tooth to a full denture. If any dental prosthesis becomes damaged or broken during travel, travelers should be advised not to throw these away. Broken dentures and other prostheses may be repairable. Any broken dentures should be kept in a clean plastic bag, with acrylic resin dentures being kept moist, and should be taken to a dentist. Travelers should seek advice from their dentist about caring for dentures during travel. If possible, travelers should be advised to take a spare set of dentures.

What Do I Do If a Tooth Breaks or I Lose a Filling?

Dental amalgam is not necessarily indestructible, and part or all of a filling may be lost during travel. Teeth can also break as the result of an accident or indirectly due to brittleness of the dentine. Since accidents can happen playing sports while traveling, mouthguards or other protective equipment that travelers would normally use for sport
should be taken overseas to help protect teeth. If a traveler's tooth breaks and there is pain, pain relief should be taken and a dentist consulted immediately. Even if there is no pain, travelers should see a dentist. Travelers should also keep any part of a broken tooth, if possible, in a clean plastic bag to be taken with them to the dentist.

Often there is pain or sensitivity when fillings are lost, and travelers should consult a dentist immediately if this is the case. Lost fillings should not be ignored, even if there is no pain; a dentist should still be consulted by the traveler, as soon as possible, to avoid long-term complications and expensive procedures, such as root canal treatment. In general terms, however, oral infections are not necessarily more common in the tropics.1,5

Is There Anything I Should Know about My Children's Teeth While Traveling?

It is easy for travelers to overlook routine dental appointments for children when preparing for travel. Young children often have erupting primary or permanent teeth, and they may have some problems with their teeth while traveling. Travelers should ensure that their children are covered by travel insurance. Children are also more likely to suffer from some illness while traveling. Some antibiotics, which may be available over the counter in some countries, may affect the development of permanent teeth (e.g., tetracyclines such as doxycycline) so travelers should be advised to consult a doctor or travel clinic abroad before any such medication is given to a child during travel.

References