

Protect That Smile!

by Scott F. Kenward, DMD

Dental injuries are the most common type of facial injury sustained during sports participation in America. According to the National Youth Sports Foundation, more than 5 million teeth will be knocked out in sporting activities this year alone. The American Dental Association estimates that over 200,000 of these injuries are prevented each year by the use of sports mouthguards.

The lifetime dental rehabilitation costs can approach several thousand dollars per tooth for the athlete who loses a tooth (or teeth) in a sporting injury. In fact, replacing a single knocked-out tooth will cost more than 10 times the preventive cost of a custom fit, professional grade mouthguard.

What Is a Mouthguard?

A mouthguard is an appliance worn in the mouth that helps prevent injuries to the teeth, lips, cheeks, tongue, and jaw. It should be worn in addition to protective headgear, which also protects against injuries to the head and neck.

If you or your child plays soccer, baseball, softball, football, volleyball, rollerblading, skateboarding, martial arts, boxing, kickboxing, roller hockey, ice hockey or lacrosse, wearing a custom fabricated mouthguard could significantly reduce the chance of dental injury.

What Types of Mouthguards Are Available?

There are three types of mouthguards from which to choose:

Stock or ready-made mouthguards: These are the least expensive type and can be bought at most sporting goods stores, ready to wear. Unfortunately, they often don't fit very well. Although they come in several shapes and sizes, little can be done to adjust the stock mouthguard to fit your mouth. Many athletes complain that they are often too bulky, loose and uncomfortable, and usually interfere with breathing and speaking.

Mouth-formed or boil and bite mouthguards: These are still relatively inexpensive and are also available from many sporting goods stores. They are molded to fit each individual mouth by boiling the mouthguard in water and then biting into the warm plastic. Boil and bite mouthguards provide a false sense of protection due to the dramatic decrease in thickness created when the athlete bites the softened mouthpiece into place. And if you don't follow the directions carefully, you can wind up with a poor-fitting mouth protector.

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Custom-made mouthguards: This is the most highly recommended type of mouthguard. It is made at the dental office where it is individually designed and constructed by a dental professional. The custom mouthguard is a bit more expensive than the other types, but it has an exceptionally good fit. It is comfortable and does not interfere with speech or breathing. Available in four grades and 12 colors, mouthguards such as the Playsafe Mouthguard have been proven to provide the highest level of protection for the athlete.

Caring For Your Mouthguard

- Rinse under cold water after each use.
- Occasionally clean your mouthguard in a solution of soap and cool water.
- Store it in a container containing water so it will not get damaged or lost.
- Like any other sports gear, mouthguards can tear or wear out; therefore, replace them after each sports season.

I Wear Braces. Can I Use a Mouthguard?

Many young athletes, ages 7-18, are also undergoing some form of orthodontic treatment. Their lips are even more prone to lacerations from impact trauma against the braces. A blow to the face could damage the brackets or other fixed orthodontic appliances. Mouthguards for these athletes are necessary for all sports; even for the so-called non-contact sports, such as soccer, basketball and baseball. A retainer or other removable orthodontic appliance should not be worn during any contact sports.

Standard boil and bite or custom-made mouthguards have always been difficult for children in braces to wear. These mouthguards do not fit comfortably over the braces and as teeth move due to orthodontic treatment, the mouthguards do not fit at all.

The Total Gard mouthguard is a ready-made mouthguard designed by an orthodontist to fit over all braces and orthodontic appliances. It was designed to fit comfortably and not interfere with orthodontic treatment. It helps protect both upper and lower teeth and has an opening in the front to allow for easy breathing and speech. Total Gard is available in 3 sizes to fit all athletes.

Talk to your dentist or orthodontist about selecting a sports mouthguard that will provide the best protection for your young athlete.

Dr. Kenward is a dentist at 12651 South Dixie Highway in Pinecrest. His focus is on cosmetic and preventive dentistry. For more information call 305-255-7722.