

# GET smart WITH YOUR SMILE

You brush your teeth twice a day and try to remember to floss regularly, but are you less confident about other areas of your dental care? Louise Atkinson looks at the root cause of dentistry concerns right now



## THE REAL COST

It's hardly surprising that some resort to desperate measures. Toothache is believed to be a major reason for absences from work and, according to Professor Justin Durham, chief scientific advisor to the BDA, it's the number one driver of unintentional overdoses from paracetamol. 'Dental pain has always had a huge impact on people's lives, including their physical and mental health, and their productivity. Now they face a double whammy,' he says. 'Patients in pain are unable to secure the care they need, and patients wanting to stay out of pain through routine check-ups are unable to secure an appointment.'

The key worry is that dentists are at the front line of health, and are best placed to pick up whole-body conditions such as diabetes, osteoporosis, stress and poor nutrition, as well as early symptoms of oral cancer. 'Dentistry is part of primary care, not an optional extra,' says Rachel.

So, if you want the best for your teeth – and your health – what can you do?

While politicians argue the best way is to reform the NHS dentistry system, the options are, frankly, limited.

All the experts approached by *Good Housekeeping* agreed we must get back into the habit of regular dental check-ups and treatment. They said no good can come of ignoring pain, bleeding gums or decay and hoping it will go away.

'Regular appointments allow your dentist to understand what's normal for your mouth, and it's a false economy to ignore small problems or issues that can become more difficult (and expensive) to treat further down the line,' warns Dr Eckhardt.

But do we just need to get used to swallowing the increasing costs? 'We need to change our expectation that dental care should be free,' Dr Eckhardt adds. 'We might not currently pay for a GP appointment, but we do pay for prescriptions, eye tests and glasses. It's a personal choice whether you buy functional spectacles or splash out on designer frames – and the same can be said for dentistry.'

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## ALL CHANGE

Back in 2006, the NHS changed the way it paid dentists. Instead of remunerating each dentist on a filling-by-filling basis, a three-band system was introduced, which restricted payment so that many dentists struggled to cover basic costs. As a result, increasing numbers had to set up privately, charging more to survive.

'Dentist surgeries aren't run like GP surgeries,' explains Dr Charlotte Eckhardt, dean of The Faculty of Dental Surgery of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. 'They're run as a business, and the dentists have to make the books balance.'

Only a decade or so ago, you might have seen your dentist every six months for a check-up, scale and polish and possibly receive a finger-wagging about not flossing daily. It was a wonderfully reassuring GP-style check-up for your teeth. But the dental landscape has completely changed in more recent times.

While the dentists themselves are still the friendly, highly trained professionals they've always been, many of us feel that we're lucky to

have or find an NHS dentist, who may only seem able to offer the most rudimentary care. There's every chance your NHS practice has now gone largely private, or that you've had to sign up with a private practice and become bombarded with posters and leaflets that talk about various cosmetic treatments or buying a glitzy celebrity smile.

And, if it's been a some time since you sat in a dentist's chair and you need extensive treatment, you could be facing a serious bill.

So, what's going on?





READ OUR GUIDE TO NAVIGATING THE NEW FACE OF DENTISTRY

HOW TO FIND A GOOD DENTIST

To find your nearest NHS dentist, call 0300 311 2233 or enter your postcode into the search bar on the 'Find a dentist' page of nhs.uk. Your choices may be limited and you might have to travel some distance from home. You're likely to have more luck finding a private dentist taking on new patients. Ask friends and family for local recommendations.

WHAT PRICE FOR HEALTHY TEETH?

An NHS dentist can offer free treatment if you are: under 18, under 19 and in full-time education, pregnant or have had a baby in the previous 12 months or are receiving low-income benefits. Anyone else signed up to an NHS dentist

(including pensioners) should expect to pay a subsidised one-off cost of either £25.80 (for a check-up), £70.70 (if you require fillings, root canal treatment or extraction) and a maximum of £306.80 (if you need a more complex series of work such as crowns, dentures or bridges).

Your NHS dentist may suggest you pay on a private basis for some procedures (such as a complex root canal treatment if they feel you need to see a specialist), but if you believe your treatment should be available on the NHS, you can call NHS Dental Services on 0300 330 1348 for advice. In England, you may also contact your local integrated care board (see nhs.uk).

At present, you're likely to only be offered treatment that an NHS dentist feels is clinically necessary to keep your teeth, gums and mouth healthy. A private dentist is more likely to be

willing to discuss more cosmetic procedures, such as whitening, and you may get the extra benefit of new X-ray technology and specialised equipment.

Private dentists don't follow fixed pricing structures. According to a recent study, a check-up with a private dentist might cost up to £100, fillings (amalgam or white) can cost up to £160, root canal treatment might cost up to £550 and crowns £965 each\*. But some may charge even more.

Private dentists don't have fixed prices

The Patients Association recommends shopping around. Most dental practices state their prices on their website or will give you a price list if asked. The Patients Association also suggests asking for an estimate of costs in writing, and, if you're concerned, to get more than one quote if you can. If you're presented with a worryingly long list of expensive procedures, ask if the treatment can be 'staged' over a year or 18 months to help spread the cost.

IS INSURANCE WORTH IT?

Ask your dentist if they offer an insurance package and whether that represents good value for you. Your monthly contribution will depend on the health of your teeth and the expectation of future work. The payments usually cover check-ups, toothache and regular dental work such as fillings and X-rays, but it rarely covers orthodontic work, tooth implants and cosmetic dentistry. You can compare prices on a range of insurance policies at comparison websites such as moneysavingexpert.com or comparethemarket.com - simply enter 'dental insurance' into the search bar.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU NEED A CHECK-UP?

Your dentist will advise on how often you need a check-up. This could be every three months or every two years, depending on the health of your teeth and gums and your risk of future problems.

DO YOU NEED TO SEE A HYGIENIST?

These days, you're less likely to be given 'a quick scale and polish' after your check-up, but if your gums are unhealthy (for example, prone to bleeding), your dentist may recommend you see a hygienist. The majority of dentists also regard six-monthly hygienist visits as good housekeeping for your teeth and gums: 'I'm a great believer in regular hygienist visits for everyone - not just those with poor oral health,' says Dr Joe Bansal from londonsmiling.com.

He believes hygienists perform a vital role in instilling good oral habits - recommending the best brushes, toothpastes and flossing devices to

suit your teeth, with expert advice for using the brush and dental sticks correctly. You can only get hygienist treatment on the NHS if your dentist considers it to be 'clinically necessary', so in most cases you'll need to pay.

ARE 'TURKEY TEETH' EVER A GOOD IDEA?

Travelling abroad to countries such as Turkey for cheaper dentistry treatment has exploded in popularity, but it's not without risks. Before considering dental treatment overseas, seek recommendations and research the clinic thoroughly; ask to see the dentist's CV, so you can check where they qualified and how long they've

practised; call to ensure the staff speak good English; and ask about aftercare and warranties, so you're protected if something goes wrong. The NHS website also offers a useful 'Treatment abroad checklist' with further checks you should make.

If it's something you're considering, Rachel Power recommends discussing your plans with your own dentist first: 'Some patients are surprised to discover they can't get follow-up care on the NHS for work done overseas,' she says. 'Many people going

abroad are doing so because they want or need advanced, higher-cost procedures, but these are more likely to result in complications.'

Travelling abroad for cheaper treatment has exploded

EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT DENTAL 'TWEAKMENTS'

Good dentistry is all about making sure your teeth and gums are healthy and functioning optimally, but cosmetic dental procedures are increasingly popular as a way of brightening your smile (and, potentially, knocking years off your appearance) for a big birthday or event.

INVISALIGN

Braces have moved on since the days of metal train tracks. Now, if your teeth are uneven, crooked or crowded, they can be gently nudged into neat rows over a period of a few months by wearing transparent plastic 'aligners'.

PROS - painless, non-invasive, invisible, gentle action.

CONS - aligners must be worn for 20-22 hours a day and only briefly removed to eat or drink. You must also wear a night guard afterwards to stop teeth returning to their former position.

COST - around £3,000 to £5,000, depending on location and degree of work required.

WHITENING

A small amount of bleaching gel is smeared on plastic 'trays' worn over the teeth at night, gradually lightening them.

PROS - a harmless and effective way to remove stains and discolouration (the oxygenation process helps protect the teeth from decay).

CONS - can trigger sensitivity (short-term) and needs repeating every few years.

COST - £300 to £500, depending on location.

COMPOSITE BONDING

Damaged or shortened teeth can be disguised and gaps between teeth filled with tooth-coloured composite resin material.

PROS - the tooth doesn't need to be drilled or prepared (which can damage the natural tooth), the process is painless, it can be completed in one visit and is reversible if required.

CONS - it only lasts up to seven years, and the resin can chip (requiring repair) and stain.

COST - £300 to £500 per tooth. □