

Deadly Dental Abscess: Fact vs. Fiction

Have you ever had your gum swell from an infected tooth? Has anyone ever told you that the “poison” from the infection can kill you? Is this just an “old wives tale”, or is it the truth?

Dental abscesses are the result of a bacterial infection originating in the teeth or gums. If a tooth is the source of the infection, it is usually the result of an untreated cavity or a deep fracture through the root.

A cavity is an infection caused by a combination of carbohydrate-containing foods and bacteria that live in our mouths. When these bacteria find carbohydrates, they digest them and produce acid. The acid dissolves the hard enamel that forms the outer coating of our teeth. As the cavity progresses deeper into the tooth, it eventually infects the nerve and blood supply contained within the tooth. At this point you will usually notice some pain, especially when eating or drinking cold or hot foods and beverages or when biting down.

In some cases, a dental abscess is caused by an infection of the gum. Bone loss from periodontal (gum) disease can cause a pocket or space to form between the tooth, gum, and bone. Bacteria and other debris get into the pocket and an abscess (infection) can form.

A dental abscess is treated in a number of ways, depending on the source and severity of the infection. If decay has caused the abscess, the tooth will require a root canal. If the gum has caused the abscess, the gum will require a deep cleaning or surgical treatment. If the cracked tooth is the source of the infection, it can only be removed. Regardless of the source, a swelling of the gum indicates a more serious infection.

So how dangerous is an abscess? It all depends on how soon the patient sees his or her dentist. If a person waits until the gum is so swollen that they have difficulty breathing or opening their mouth, the situation is very serious. Dental infections can also spread to spaces between tissues or deep in bone. These are the type of infections that are difficult to treat and can be fatal.