

Dental work: It's not so hard to save a tooth from sports injury

By Rose Mary Reiz

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Edward Tomaszewski, 16, is one of 800,000 athletes who lose teeth each year while playing sports - but it'd be like pulling teeth to get him to stop.

"There's no stopping him," Edward's mom, Shannon, said of her son, who accidentally was hit in the mouth by another player's forehead during a Lake Fenton High School soccer game last fall.

"Aside from a concussion, one of his top front teeth was just hanging there, and the one next to it was twisted and went through his lip," Shannon said. "We were all freaking out."

Shannon, the daughter of a dentist, had the presence of mind to tell her son to shove his hanging tooth back into its socket during their ride to the hospital.

"He kept telling me, 'It hurts,' and I kept saying, 'Keep it in there.'"

Shannon's quick thinking saved her son's tooth, though Edward ended up needing extensive dental care, including a root canal and braces.

"We've put a lot of money into his mouth, and it's still a work in progress," his mom said.

Injuries can happen at any time, but the fall-to-spring school sports season is prime time for knocked out teeth, said Michael Lindemann, a Flint Township endodontist with 30 years experience.

"This is when kids are playing hockey and can get hit with a puck or stick, get an elbow in the face during basketball or slip on the floor at a swim meet," Lindemann said.

According to the Michigan Association for Endodontists, sports injuries are among the leading causes of the approximately 5 million teeth that are knocked out each year.

The figure was even higher in the days before mandatory hockey masks and mouth guards, said Doug Towler, a Davison High School hockey coach who's seen his share of missing teeth in the past 28 years.

"Back in my day, you'd see guys lose four or six teeth at once," Towler said. "When a puck is going 90 miles an hour and gets deflected, there's no time to react. I lost a front tooth myself once when I was blocking a shot."

Masks and mouth guards now are mandatory equipment for hockey players, as is protective gear in other organized sports. But athletes often don't follow the same rules when playing pick-up games at a neighborhood pond or sandlot, Towler said.

"They're just out there to play hard and have a good time, and they're not thinking of injuries."

Knowing what to do when a tooth is knocked out can mean the difference between saving the tooth and costly dental replacements, Lindemann said.

When a tooth is knocked out, its roots begin to die within minutes. The chances of saving the tooth greatly decrease if it has become dry or has been out of the socket for an hour or longer.

Here's Lindemann's advice for saving a knocked-out tooth:

- Note the time the tooth was knocked out.
- Find the tooth. Pick it up by the crown, not the root.
- Pick off any debris and rinse the tooth off.
- Re-plant the tooth in the socket, keep it in place and get to the dentist or an emergency room immediately (note: baby teeth should not be re-planted). The dentist will want to know when the injury occurred and will stabilize the tooth, a necessary step in saving it.
- If it's not possible to re-insert the tooth in the socket, store it in cool milk, water or snow - or put the tooth in the child's or parent's mouth to keep it moist.
- Best of all: Buy and carry something called Save-a-Tooth, a portable vial designed to save and transport teeth. The system keeps a tooth alive and protected for up to 24 hours until a dentist can implant it. (Available at sport supply stores or at www.save-a-tooth.com).

"Every coach should carry one," Lindemann said.

And maybe moms, too.