

What to Do If You Lose or Damage Your Aligner or Retainer

A missing or broken appliance is urgent for your tooth position—act the same day when you can.

Aligners and retainers are custom to your teeth at a specific stage of treatment. When one is lost, crushed, or cracked, teeth can begin to shift within days—especially during active clear aligners or early orthodontics retention. This guide helps you decide what to do in the first hours: what not to wear, whether an old tray is safe, and how to reach the clinic. It does not replace their emergency instructions. If you were told to keep certain backup trays, follow that card exactly. For day-to-day wear and cleaning after you have a replacement, use invisalign wear instructions and retainer care. Shifting toward old misaligned teeth positions can happen quietly until the next tray no longer fits.

First step: call the clinic today

Phone or message your treating team as soon as you notice a problem. Same-day contact is ideal. Reception can schedule an emergency fit check or start a replacement order.

Have your tray number, last change date, and a short description ready—lost, cracked, warped by heat, or chewed by a pet.

If the office is closed, use any after-hours instructions they gave you. Do not wait until your next routine visit if you are mid-series or in full-time retention.

Serious injury to teeth or jaws from trauma is separate from a lost appliance—seek urgent dental or medical care for knocked teeth or bleeding lacerations.

Lost aligner during active treatment

Do not jump to the next tray in the series unless the clinic explicitly told you to do that in writing for this situation. Skipping ahead can move teeth too fast or in the wrong order.

If you still have the previous tray and it fits, your team may instruct you to wear it full time until a replacement arrives. Store it in a clean case when out of the mouth.

If both current and previous trays are gone, you may need to stay out of aligners briefly—but that is a decision for the clinician, not a guess at home. Minimise time without any appliance.

Check common loss spots: restaurant bins, school lunch trays, hotel bathrooms, and washing machines if a tray was wrapped in a napkin.

Cracked, torn, or warped aligners

A small hairline crack can spread under chewing pressure even with aligners out during meals—trays still flex in the mouth. Stop wearing a cracked tray after notifying the clinic unless they say the crack is safe.

Heat warps plastic. Trays left in hot cars, washed in boiling water, or placed on radiators may not seat correctly. Warped trays can apply uneven forces.

Do not repair trays with superglue or tape. Chemicals and rough edges irritate gums and do not restore designed tooth movement.

Take a photo of the damage for the office if they ask. Bring the broken pieces to the appointment when possible.

Lost or broken retainer after treatment

Teeth can relapse faster than during active aligner steps because retention is about holding position, not active movement. Call the same day.

If you have a previous retainer from an earlier phase and it seats fully without forcing, the clinic may tell you to wear it while a new one is made. Forcing a retainer that barely fits can harm teeth.

Fixed retainer wires that debond still need professional rebonding. Do not use the missing removable retainer as an excuse to skip nights if you still have another prescribed appliance.

See retainer care for cleaning and wear once you receive the replacement.

What not to do while you wait

Do not borrow a family member's aligner or retainer. Their fit is wrong for your teeth and can move or scratch your enamel.

Do not buy generic boil-and-bite guards online as a long-term substitute unless the dentist approved that temporary measure.

Do not stop brushing or eating normally; focus on keeping teeth clean so a new appliance seats well when it arrives.

Avoid hard testing bites on sore teeth if you are wearing an older backup tray—the goal is holding position, not experimenting with force.

Replacement timelines and cost

Replacements may take days to weeks depending on whether the lab still has your scan or needs new impressions. Ask for an estimated date and whether rush fees apply.

Some treatment plans include a limited number of replacement trays; others charge per arch. Clarify so you are not surprised.

If travel interrupted wear, tell the team—they may adjust the plan rather than simply duplicating the lost stage.

Keep new trays in labelled bags if you were asked to save stages for backups in the future.

Preventing repeat losses

Use a bright case that is hard to miss in a bag. Attach a small carabiner to a school bag for teens.

Never wrap trays in tissues or napkins. That is the most common loss scenario in dining areas.

Rinse and insert immediately after meals when possible so trays are not left on tables.

Pets: keep cases on shelves, not nightstands. Chewed trays need replacement, not trimming at home.

- Case in pocket or bag at every meal out
- Label with name and phone on the case
- Backup previous stage only if your clinic advised keeping it

When tooth position feels different

If a gap reopened or a tooth rotated slightly before the replacement arrives, mention it at the fit check. Early correction may need a new scan rather than remaking the identical tray number.

Pain with swelling or fever is not typical for a lost appliance alone—report those symptoms promptly.

Long gaps without any retainer or aligner increase relapse risk toward misaligned teeth patterns you treated.

braces vs clear aligners compares treatment types; retention and backup planning apply to both paths.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I move to the next aligner if I lost the current one?

Only if your clinician told you to for this exact situation. Otherwise you risk skipping steps that guide teeth safely. Call first.

How long can I go without wearing an aligner?

Hours matter less than days. Teeth begin to shift when appliances are out repeatedly. Follow interim wear instructions from your team until replacement arrives.

Is the previous tray safe to wear full time?

Often yes if it still fits snugly, but confirm by phone. A loose previous tray does not hold position well.

My dog chewed my retainer—can it be repaired?

Chewed plastic is usually replaced, not repaired. Bring remnants if asked. Do not file sharp edges and continue wearing without approval.

Will I be charged for a replacement aligner?

Policies differ by practice and contract. Ask when you call. Some plans include one replacement; others bill per tray.

What if I lose an aligner while travelling abroad?

Contact your home clinic for advice. They may ship a replacement, coordinate with a local dentist for a temporary solution, or instruct previous-tray wear. Do not advance on your own.

Where can I review daily wear and cleaning?

invisalign wear instructions covers wear hours; retainer care covers long-term retention after active treatment.

Important reminder

These instructions are general educational guidance. Your dentist may give instructions that differ depending on the procedure, your medical history, and how treatment was performed. Follow the written or verbal instructions provided specifically for you. This guide does not replace professional dental or medical advice, diagnosis, or emergency care.