I have stitched more than a few split lips at community rinks and replaced enough chipped front teeth to buy a Zamboni. If you play contact sports around Winnipeg, or you have a kid who does, a mouthguard is not an accessory. It is sports equipment, as important as skates that fit or a helmet that buckles. The trick is choosing the right one and wearing it the right way, so you get protection without feeling like you are chewing on a tire.

I am a dentist in Winnipeg, and most autumns I see the same parade. Hockey tryouts start, football playoffs heat up, ringette and lacrosse roll in, and I start fielding questions: Do mouthguards prevent concussions? Which is better, boil and bite or custom? Can my son wear one over braces? Why does my daughter gag on every guard she tries? Why did last year's guard look like it was stored in a hockey sock? And the money question, literally: is a custom guard worth the cost?

Let's take those in a practical order, with the candor of someone who has seen everything from dollar-store guards to pressure-laminated lab beauties, and the aftermath when nothing was worn at all.

What a mouthguard actually does

Two jobs, one small device. First, it acts as a bumper to spread the force of a blow across a wider area, so a stick or elbow does not drive a single tooth through a lip, or a lower incisor into the palate. The material absorbs and distributes impact, and the fit keeps the jaw from slamming shut in a way that shatters enamel. That is the well-supported benefit. Every season I can point to a game where a guard saved a pair of incisors, a root canal, and months of dental work.

Second, there is the hot topic of concussion. Some studies suggest mouthguards may reduce the risk or severity, possibly by stabilizing the jaw and reducing transmitted forces up the temporomandibular joint. Others show little to no effect. The balance of evidence is mixed. As a Winnipeg dentist who treats athletes across hockey, rugby, and basketball, I tell families this: count on a mouthguard to prevent dental and soft tissue injuries. Consider any concussion reduction a possible bonus, not a guarantee.

The styles in the wild, and what matters

There are three broad categories. They differ in cost, fit, comfort, and performance.

- Stock guards come straight out of a package, no shaping. They are cheap, widely available, and protect better than nothing. They also tend to be bulky, require constant clenching just to stay in, and muffle speech. If you only play shinny once a month or you forgot your guard and need a one-off, fine. As a regular solution, they are the flip-flops of mouth protection.

- Boil and bite guards are thermoplastic trays you soften in hot water and mold at home. Price ranges roughly from 20 to 40 dollars. Fit depends on the brand and your technique. The best of these can be decent for casual play or as a backup. The worst end up thin in high-stress areas because shoppers bite too hard during molding, stretching plastic away from where you need it.

- Custom guards are made from an impression or digital scan, then vacuum-formed or pressure-laminated in a dental lab. They hug the teeth, stop at a safe point on the palate, and offer targeted thickness. Costs in Winnipeg usually run 120 to 250 dollars, with team rates at the lower end. They last longer, interfere less with breathing and speech, and protect better when designed properly.

The material on most quality guards is EVA, ethylene vinyl acetate, because it balances shock absorption and flexibility. Good customs can use multi-layer EVA, sometimes with a harder insert or dual-laminate design.

Thickness matters. For contact sports, the sweet spot is generally around 3 to 4 millimetres in high-impact front areas and 2 to 3 millimetres on occluding surfaces. Thicker is not always better. A 6 millimetre slab makes for a poor conversation on the bench and often gets “accidentally” lost in a glove.

Fit is not a luxury feature

A mouthguard should stay in place with gentle suction. If you have to clench to keep it seated, you will fatigue your jaw and breathe worse. A proper fit means no rocking on the molars, no sudden drop when you open wide, and no plastic jabbing the soft palate. Speech should be understandable. You can call for a pass without sounding like you swallowed a marshmallow.

One of my hockey patients, a left winger from St. James, came in after taking a shoulder near the boards. He had a custom guard we made two seasons prior. The guard showed a deep bite mark where the canine hit, but his teeth did not chip and his lip did not split. He replaced the guard after the season, but the repair bill was 200 dollars, not 2,000. Last year a Grade 10 player arrived with a knocked-out central incisor after trying a stock guard he had to chew just to keep in. That one was a five-figure journey by the end of implants and orthodontics. Two different choices, two very different outcomes.

Winnipeg realities: rink air, braces, and growing jaws

Cold, dry rink air amplifies gag reflexes. If a guard extends too far onto the palate or rides down onto moving soft tissue, you will feel it the first breath you take at the Seven Oaks Arena. That is why I trim and contour palatal margins carefully for hockey and ringette, keeping the coverage adequate for retention but shy of the trigger zone. Basketball players usually tolerate a bit more palatal extension, since they are not gasping off the rush in sub-zero air.

Braces change the conversation. You need room for brackets and wires, and you need the guard to allow teeth to move. Off-the-shelf “braces” versions of boil and bite guards exist, and some are decent for short-term use. If you are in active orthodontic treatment and you play a collision sport, a custom orthodontic guard works better. I design extra labial thickness over the brackets, relieve around hooks, and leave careful clearance so a wire tweak next month does not turn the guard into a vise. When wires get changed, bring the guard. Minor adjustments are quick.

Mixed dentition, that awkward stage when adult teeth and baby teeth share the party, makes fitting tricky. I plan for eruption paths. It often means accepting a slightly shorter lifespan for the guard, with a tweak or remake after front teeth fully erupt. For eight to eleven-year-olds in house league hockey, a well-fitted boil and bite can be a practical bridge, especially if a growth spurt is coming. For older teens playing AAA or city championship rugby, the stakes jump, and a pressure-laminated custom is the smart choice.

How customs are made, and why pressure matters

We either take a conventional impression or use a digital intraoral scanner, then create a model. From there, a technician forms heated EVA over the model. Vacuum formers pull the material down. Pressure formers push it under several bars of pressure. The higher the pressure, the better the contour and adaptation around critical anatomy. That means better retention with less bulk.

For contact sports I prefer multi-layer pressure-laminated guards. We can stack two or three sheets, vary the thickness where hits are likely, and add a bite stop so the guard does not wedge your jaw forward. It is more work, but the comfort is obvious the first time you call for the puck without tasting plastic. Turnaround time in

my clinic is usually two to five days. Faster if we are doing a team night, where we scan everyone at the rink or in the office and batch the lab work.

Colour, logos, and the psychology of actually wearing it

If an athlete likes how something looks, they are more likely to wear it. We offer team colours, marbling, embedded numbers, even names. I like bright colours for hockey, because a lost guard is easier to spot on the ice, and officials can confirm it is in during warmups. Dark colours hide blood, which some kids claim is cool until a parent is cleaning the guard in the sink.

There is also the matter of speech. Captains need to talk, goalies need to shout, and everyone needs to breathe hard. A good custom lets you do that. When I see a player constantly spitting the guard half out to talk, I know it is either too bulky or too loose. Small changes in thickness and palatal edge can fix it.

The concussion question, revisited with nuance

The mouthguard is not a helmet for your brain. It will not stop whiplash or a blindside hit from transmitting forces through your neck and skull. Some research shows guards can reduce the severity of jaw-impact related forces, which may help in certain hits. The reduction ranges, when reported, tend to be modest and vary by sport and guard type. Stock guards and poorly fitted boil and bite guards do not show consistent benefits beyond mouth protection. High-quality customs, especially those that stabilize the mandible without forcing it into an unnatural position, may offer more. The data is not uniform. I do not sell concussion prevention. I sell teeth, lips, and cheeks staying intact.

Care and lifespan: the boring part that saves you money

A mouthguard is not a forever device. EVA fatigues under chewing, saliva, and cleaning chemicals. For most adults, a good custom lasts one to two seasons. Heavy grinders wear through faster. Teens outgrow sevenoaksdentalcentre.com guards as teeth erupt and jaws widen. If the guard gets loose or you can twist it, it is time to remake.

Here is the short routine I give every athlete:

- Rinse it with cool water right after use, then brush it with a soft toothbrush and mild soap, not toothpaste.
- Store it in a ventilated case, away from car dashboards or radiators. Heat warps EVA fast.
- Once a week, soak it in a non-alcohol antimicrobial rinse or a mouthguard tablet made for dental appliances. Avoid bleach.
- Do not chew it during practice. You will thin the critical zones without realizing it.
- Bring it to your hygiene visit. A quick check and ultrasonic clean go a long way.

If you have a dog, keep the case out of reach. Dogs love the smell of EVA spiked with your sweat and will eat the entire thing like a treat. I have remade more “dogged” mouthguards than I care to count.

Cost, insurance, and the math of prevention

Let’s talk dollars. In Winnipeg, off-the-shelf guards run 5 to 15 dollars for stock, and 20 to 40 for boil and bite. Customs, as noted, usually sit between 120 and 250, sometimes lower for team bookings. Many insurance plans cover a portion under preventive or appliance codes. Health spending accounts usually apply. Spread across a season, a custom that fits, gets worn, and prevents a single chipped incisor is a very cheap investment.

A simple chipped edge may cost a few hundred to repair. A deep fracture with a root canal and crown moves into the thousands. A knocked-out tooth followed by an implant and crown, plus bone grafting if needed, can climb to five figures by the time growth is complete. This is not scare talk. It is the ledger I have seen across a decade-plus as a dentist winnipeg families trust during playoff season.

Sports specific notes, from the chair to the bench

Hockey and ringette see a lot of front-on impacts and collisions near boards. I prefer a slightly beefier labial shield and generous coverage over the canines. Bright colour helps the coach and officials confirm compliance, since many leagues in the Winnipeg area mandate wear for certain age groups.

Rugby and football carry a mix of front and lateral hits, with scrums and piles that press from odd angles. A dual-laminate custom with reinforced posterior occlusion spreads forces well. I avoid protrusive mandible positioning in these sports, keeping the bite neutral.

Basketball and soccer are sneaky for dental injuries. Elbows and headbutts are common. Because athletes talk more on court, thinner palatal extension helps speech. Ventilated cases are essential here, since the guard lives in the bag between games, and those bags are humid science experiments.

Lacrosse is fast and physical. Sticks find faces. A stiffer outer laminate with EVA inside does well. The key is precise fit so it stays put during sprints.

Goalies of any sport who do not move as much still take violent impacts. They deserve the same labial protection, even if they insist the mask handles it. Masks help. Sticks and pucks still do what they want.

Braces, bridges, and oddball cases

Braces need space. If you break a wire during a game, the mouthguard should not trap the broken end against the cheek. A custom orthodontic guard gives that clearance. If you have a fixed bridge, the guard’s fit over the pontic area should be snug but not torquing. Removable partials should be out for contact sports, and the guard should be built to protect the abutment teeth that take more force when a partial is not in.

Oral piercings multiply the risk of lacerations. If you will not remove the jewelry, we can build a channel to reduce friction, but protection is never perfect. If you have a history of TMJ pain, we can add a flat plane occlusion into the guard to keep the joint in a friendly position. That takes a little occlusal mapping and is worth it if you are prone to clenching under stress.

Boil and bite done right, if that is your lane

If you are going the boil and bite route, technique matters. Use water just off the boil, not a rolling cauldron. Soften the guard as instructed by the brand, then press it gently into place with fingers and tongue. Do not bite like you are crushing a walnut. That thins out the very surfaces that absorb impact. Suck to create a seal, use thumbs along the front teeth to adapt the labial edge, and trim the posterior if it extends too far. Redo it once if the first try leaves thin spots or gaggy edges. If you cannot get a stable fit without clenching, consider stepping up to a custom.

What a good fit feels like, and quick red flags

The right mouthguard feels like it belongs. You can jog without it thumping against your palate. You can say numbers. You can open to drink water and it stays seated. Red flags include a white line across the gums where

the edge digs in, teeth marks that nearly punch through the material, and a sour odour that lingers after cleaning. Sour means bacterial growth in microcracks or in a case that should have been retired when the Jets last missed the playoffs.

How a dentist in Winnipeg approaches team nights

For teams that want customs, we schedule a scanning night, sometimes at the rink lobby. The workflow is fast. We capture digital scans, pick colours, note braces or eruption issues, and send everything to the lab in one batch. Delivery is usually at the next practice. Bulk pricing helps, and more importantly, fit checks happen with the coach right there. I can adjust on the spot, and the team starts the season protected and uniform.

Parents appreciate not spending a Saturday morning shuttling kids to and from the clinic, and I appreciate seeing the guards in the environment where they will live: the bag, the bench, the breath of a kid who just took a shift.

The difference between a night guard and a sports guard

I still meet athletes who try to skate with their bruxism night guard. Please do not. Night guards are hard acrylic or rigid thermoplastic splints designed for grinding control and joint support. They absorb little shock, often leave the front teeth exposed, and can shatter under impact. Sports guards are softer, thicker in the right places, and cover differently. There is a reason insurance codes and materials differ. If you need both, we make both.

Little maintenance details that separate clean from gross

Hot car dashboards warp guards in a single sunny practice. Alcohol-based mouthwashes can dry and craze EVA. Toothpaste is abrasive and scratches the surface, which invites odour. Cool water, mild soap, soft brush. Let it air dry before casing. Replace the case if the hinge cracks or it smells like a hockey glove. Name and number on the case, because at least two kids on every team own the same colour.

For the record, those perforated mouthguards that promise better airflow can be fine when properly formed. The holes are not a magic breathing straw. Fit and thickness still matter more.

When to replace and when to adjust

Bring the guard if a front tooth finally erupts through, if braces are debonded, or if your jaw or bite changes after dental work. We can re-adapt a custom in some cases by reheating and pressing for minor tweaks. But once a guard loses suction or the edges flare, replacement is smarter than trying to nurse it along. I would rather cut a new one than see you wear a talisman that does little when it counts.

Quick comparison for fast decisions

- Stock: cheapest, worst fit, better than nothing for emergencies.
- Boil and bite: fair price, decent if molded well, inconsistent protection.
- Custom vacuum formed: good fit, better protection, moderate cost.
- Custom pressure laminated: best fit and protection, longest lifespan, highest initial cost.

Why I keep pushing customs, even knowing budgets vary

The calculus is not just about catastrophic hits. It is about the routine elbows that never become emergencies because the force disperses into a guard instead of a tooth edge. It is about athletes who forget they are wearing it and therefore keep it in. It is about parents who do not have to decide between a crown right now or a composite that will fail twice before university.

And yes, it is also about the phone call at 9:45 p.m. On a Sunday, when a father from Fort Garry is driving to a hospital with a tooth in milk and a kid in tears. I always take those calls. I will always prefer the call that says, “Guard cracked, kid fine. Can we make another on Monday?”

If you are searching for a winnipeg dentist to sort this out before your season kicks off, find someone who sees athletes regularly, asks about your sport and position, and talks in millimetres not marketing. A dentist in winnipeg who works with teams will understand the fit quirks of cold rinks, braces seasons, and growth spurts. If you already have a trusted dentist winnipeg families recommend, bring your guard to your next cleaning and ask for a fit check. Small adjustments today save big repairs tomorrow.

Parting advice from the bench

Buy the best guard you will actually wear. Keep it clean. Replace it when it stops fitting like it belongs. Do not expect it to be a magic concussion shield. Do expect it to save your smile when a stick comes up in traffic or when a slapshot rides high. After a thousand stories from rinks and fields across the city, I still smile when a player taps their helmet and their mouth and says, “All good.” That is the point. That, and never having to explain to a teenager that a chipped front tooth will be a project they carry for decades.

If you need help picking the right guard, or your current one smells like last spring’s gym bag, come in. We will talk sport, position, braces, and budget, then build something you will not notice until the game reminds you why you have it.

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