

Teeth Grinding (Bruxism)

Most people probably grind and clench their teeth from time to time. Occasional teeth grinding does not usually cause harm, but when teeth grinding occurs on a regular basis (bruxism) the teeth can be damaged and other oral health complications can arise. Those who grind and clench may be unaware they have the habit and may not be diagnosed until the condition is advanced.

About one in three people suffer from bruxism, which can be identified by a dental hygienist, who will recommend treatment.

CAUSES OF GRINDING

Although teeth grinding can be attributed to stress and anxiety, it can also be caused by a change in the way the upper and lower teeth fit together or by missing or crooked teeth.

Other physical or psychological causes may include:

- Suppressed anger or frustration
- Aggressive, competitive or hyperactive personality type
- Other sleep problems
- Response to pain from an earache or teething (in children)
- Complications resulting from a disorder, such as Huntington's disease or Parkinson's disease

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Because grinding often occurs during sleep, most people are unaware that they grind their teeth. However, a dull headache or sore jaw upon awakening is a telltale symptom of bruxism. Many times people learn that they grind their teeth by their loved one who hears the grinding at night.

When a person has bruxism:

- The chewing surfaces of the teeth look flat.
- The enamel is worn off, exposing the dentin.
- The dentin may become sensitive.

RISK FACTORS

People who have otherwise healthy teeth and gums can clench so often and so hard that over time their teeth become sensitive. They experience:

- Jaw pain
- Tense muscles
- Headaches
- Excessive wear on teeth

Severe grinding may cause the jaw to move out of proper



balance. In some cases, persistent teeth grinding can result in a fracturing, loosening or loss of teeth.

The chronic grinding may wear teeth down to stumps. When this happens, bridges, crowns, root canals, implants, partial dentures and even complete dentures may be needed.

CARE AND TREATMENT

During regular visits, a dental hygienist will examine the mouth for signs of bruxism, such as jaw tenderness and teeth wear. If early signs are detected, the condition may be confirmed over several visits before recommending and starting therapy.

A custom-made acrylic mouth appliance, such as a night guard, may be recommended to absorb the force of biting and grinding during sleep but may be required throughout the day.

If stress is the cause of teeth grinding, options will be provided including a referral for counselling, an exercise program, physical therapy or prescription for muscle relaxants.

Other tips to help stop teeth grinding include:

- Avoid or cut back on food and drinks that contain caffeine, such as colas, chocolate and coffee.
- Avoid alcohol consumption, which tends to intensify grinding.
- Do not chew on objects such as pencils or pens.
- Self-train not to clench or grind. When clenching or grinding occurs during the day, position the tip of the tongue between the teeth. This practice trains the jaw muscles to relax. As a constant reminder to not clench or grind during the day, try putting notes on computers, telephones, doorknobs.
- Relax jaw muscles at night by holding a warm washcloth against the cheek in front of the earlobe.

BRUXISM AND CHILDREN

The problem of teeth grinding is not limited to adults. Approximately 20 per cent of children up to age 11 grind their teeth, typically at two peak times – when their baby teeth emerge and when their permanent teeth come in. Most children lose the teeth-grinding habit after the teeth have come in more fully.

Grinding of the baby teeth rarely results in problems. However, teeth grinding can cause jaw pain, headaches, wear on teeth, sensitivity or pain.

Tips to help a child stop teeth grinding include:

- Decrease the child's stress, especially just before bed.
- Try massage to relax the muscles.
- Make sure the child's diet includes plenty of water. Dehydration may be linked to teeth grinding.
- Have a dental hygienist monitor the child's teeth to determine if he or she is grinding. No intervention is usually required with preschool-age children. However, older children may need a referral for temporary crowns or other methods, such as a night guard, to prevent the grinding.

As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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