

Bruxism - Tooth Clenching and Grinding

Research suggests that as many as 50% of adults clench or grind their teeth, and nearly 20% of people tend to grind their teeth excessively, which can then cause dental traumas. This condition equally affects both men and women. It is often a patient's relative or partner who first hears the sounds of teeth grinding and thus informs the person doing it or it might be discovered by an oral health care professional who sees the evidence of damage to the teeth.

The medical term for excessive pressure on the teeth due to clenching or grinding is called Bruxism. This disorder most often occurs during the nights sleep, however, some people may also grind their teeth throughout the day. Some may even find comfort in grinding their teeth or might not notice that they are grinding.

Children may also clench or grind their teeth. Usually this is a response to others discomforts initiated by ear infections, allergies, and colds. Clenching and grinding in children almost always discontinues on its own with little damage being caused to the teeth. But a few instances, childhood clenching and grinding can extensively wear down teeth. The disorder may require a little monitoring from the dentist with treatments often being unnecessary.

Bruxism is frequently caused by emotional stressors such as daily stress, anger, anxiety, angst, frustration and pains. People who are overly aggressive, competitive, and rushed tend to be at much greater risk for Bruxism. Other origins may include alcohol consumption, some sleep disorders, and the use of certain types of prescription medications. For instance, research has shown that antidepressant drugs like that of Paxil, Prozac, and Zoloft may instigate the grinding of teeth and the associated headaches. Also, certain illicit drugs can contribute to clenching and grinding.

Bruxism can become a very serious for some people especially when you consider the normal force used for eating is somewhere around 175 psi (pounds per square inch). But cases when grinding happens, that pressure can be more than 300 psi, due to there being no food buffer between the teeth to absorb the force. This extra pressure can cause irreparable damage to the teeth. Damage that may include chipped or cracked tooth enamel, hairline fissures and fractures, broken cusps and/or the wearing down of the teeth to the gum line. The enamel can become so deteriorated due to wear that the denting (inside of the tooth) will be exposed. If left untreated, Bruxism can lead to periodontal (gum) damage, loss of fillings and/or natural teeth, root canals, very loose teeth, and jaw joint concerns.

Over time, teeth can become overly sensitive from exposed dentin, and position of the jaw may even move out of balance, which may lead to more severe issues. Some signs and symptoms that may result from clenching and grinding include earaches, headaches, tenderness, and soreness in the facial muscles and in the jaw and subsequent joint. In the morning upon waking these symptom will be most apparent.

Other common symptoms of of teeth clenching and grinding involve facial or jaw pain with tenderness upon awakening that will ultimately subside throughout the day and into the night, earaches and headaches that start in the morning and go away during the day, teeth become hyper sensitive to hot and cold stimuli plus air sensitivity or even pressure sensitivity, the edges of the teeth become flattened, or the lower front teeth get worn down or appear much shorter.

It is best to discuss any of the above signs and symptoms you may have with an experienced oral health care professional who is adept at identifying, treating and managing this disorder effectively. Methods of effective treatment will change for every patient based on the severity of the diagnosis. Stress can be alleviated with certain relaxation techniques to help minimize nighttime grinding and biofeedback techniques may be initiated to help decrease muscle activity when the forces of biting are too great. If these specific methods prove to be ineffective, your oral health care provider may develop a custom-fitted mouth guard appliance for you to wear while you sleep. This "night guard" will help absorb the shock and pressure of teeth clenching and grinding.