

Do you grind your teeth?

Do you often wake up with a dull headache or a sore jaw? Do you sometimes find yourself clenching your teeth? Until you experience pain or have a dental checkup, you may not realize that you have a condition called “bruxism,” a habit of grinding or clenching the teeth.

Many people are unaware that they grind their teeth because they do it while they sleep. Bruxism often occurs in the early part of the night and can disturb sleep partners. The clenching and grinding may be quite audible. Others make no sound while bruxing their teeth and do not realize they are doing it until the dentist discovers unusual wear spots on their teeth. Bruxism may be mild and occasional or aggressive and frequent.

People who grind or clench their teeth may wake with a headache, earache or toothache. Their facial muscles may be sore and the jaw joints tender. Besides causing discomfort, grinding can eventually damage dental restorations and may loosen teeth. Bruxism also can cause damage to the temporomandibular joints—the joints on each side of the mouth that connect the lower jaw to the skull. The pressure from clenching and grinding can cause cracks or fractures in the teeth. As the tooth enamel is worn away, the underlying layer of dentin may be exposed. This causes the tooth to become sensitive to temperature changes and pressure.

Bruxism can develop at any age. Pain or discomfort from colds, ear infections, allergies and other ailments may cause children to grind their teeth.

Although the causes of bruxism are not really known, several factors may be involved. Stressful

situations, problems in sleeping, an abnormal bite, and crooked or missing teeth may contribute.

Regular dental checkups are important to detect damage in the early stages. Your dentist can diagnose and treat irregular wear on teeth and determine the source of facial pain that may result from bruxism.

Based on your dentist’s diagnosis, one or more treatments may be recommended. Your dentist may suggest a nightguard that can be worn while sleeping. Custom-made by the dentist from soft material to fit your teeth, the nightguard slips over the teeth in one jaw and prevents contact with the opposing teeth. The nightguard relieves some of the pressure of grinding and clenching.

If stress seems to be a major cause of bruxism, it may be helpful to find ways to relax, such as listening to music, reading a book, taking a walk or enjoying a warm bath. Applying a warm, wet washcloth to the side of the face may help relax muscles that have become sore from clenching. If you have difficulty handling stress, counseling may point to effective ways of dealing with stressful situations.

An abnormal bite, one in which teeth do not fit well together, may lead to grinding. Treatment may involve reducing the “high spots” on one or more teeth. For serious cases, your dentist may suggest reshaping or reconstructing the biting surfaces with inlays or crowns.

Grinding is a common occurrence for many people at some time or another. If you routinely grind your teeth, see your dentist. ■

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