

Clenching and Grinding (Bruxism)

Most people grind their teeth on and off throughout their lifetime, depending on stress and life circumstances. Often, children grind at a young age and grow out of it as their permanent teeth start to erupt. Adults/teens often grind when they are concentrating hard or during stressful times (e.g. university exams). Occasional clenching and grinding does not really harm the teeth. However, consistent clenching and grinding can cause tooth wear and damage.

Causes of Grinding

- Stress, anxiety, anger
- A change in the way the upper and lower teeth fit together and contact when closed
- Aggressive – often during physical exercise
- Concentrating – when concentrating at something clenching is often the most common
- Sleep apnea
- Teething – when new teeth are erupting as a response to pain
- Medical disorders – for example Huntington’s Disease or Parkinson’s
- Dehydration
- Street Drugs

Signs and Symptoms of Grinding

Because most clenching and grinding happens at night, it is very difficult to become aware of the habit. Most often a partner or parents can hear other members of their family grinding or clenching at night.

Other signs and symptoms include:

- Waking with a headache
- Waking with jaw pain
- Tight/tense muscles on the face, specifically the chewing muscles (masseter)
- Excessive wear or flattening of the tops of teeth
- Chipping of front teeth
- Tooth sensitivity from the exposed dentin as the enamel is worn down



Risks of Grinding

During clenching/grinding, the teeth are more prone to fracturing or cracking. This can damage the tooth itself, as well as any prior dental work done on the tooth. Grinding also compromises the structure of the bone underneath the gums. If you lose too much bone, the teeth may become loose. If chronic grinding persists, the teeth may need repairs such as bridges, crowns, root canals. In rare cases, severely broken or cracked teeth may need removal. Lost teeth from grinding are usually replaced with an implant, bridge, or denture.

Treatments for Grinding

Treatment most commonly consists of a custom-fitted acrylic night guard. This special guard, resembling a smooth hard plastic, acts as a physical barrier between your top and bottom teeth to absorb the pressure you exert on them. The smoothness of the surface also helps to relax tense jaw muscles. If the clenching and grinding is resulting from an emotional experience, counseling may help. Some people also find physical therapy or medication such as muscle relaxants are beneficial. Often, dental treatment is done in conjunction with treatment from a Physiotherapist, Massage Therapist or Chiropractor for the best results.

Suggestions to help stop grinding:

- Become aware and try to train yourself to stop
- Frequently massage your facial muscles to soothe them throughout the day
- Use stress reduction strategies
- Hold a heating pad/pack on jaw muscles at night to help relax
- Diet – keep hydrated, avoid alcohol and limit caffeine

