

Bruxism: It's a Daily Grind

It is commonplace that we all lead active, full lives. Between work, shopping, cooking, paying bills, and driving children around, there is not much time left at the end of the day. The stress that builds can lead to teeth chipping, which is one less thing you want to deal with. Teeth grinding, known as bruxism, is a common condition that can lead to multiple problems with teeth and the jaw joint and it is most often attributed to stress.

BRUXISM IS A CONDITION IN WHICH you grind, gnash, or clench your teeth. It occurs unconsciously during sleep, but it can also happen when you are awake. Bruxism can be mild with no perceived symptoms and may not require treatment. It can also be frequent and severe, leading to tooth damage, jaw problems, and headaches. Because bruxism is done unconsciously, it often goes undiagnosed until signs, symptoms, and complications become advanced.

One of the hallmark signs of bruxism is the appearance of your teeth. With long-term grinding, teeth can begin to look worn down and flat. In addition, teeth and fillings can chip and fracture, leading to tooth sensitivity. Symptoms of bruxism can also have far-reaching effects beyond the mouth and teeth. It is not uncommon for those with bruxism to experience jaw muscle tightness and tenderness, TMJ pain, ear aches, and/or headaches. Lastly, teeth grinding can be loud enough to awaken a sleep partner.

Bruxism is a difficult condition to diagnose correctly because the signs and symptoms of grinding can be very similar, if not the same, as other dental disorders and head and neck disorders. The most reliable way to diagnose bruxism is through EMG (electromyographic) measurements. These measurements pick up and record electrical signals from the chewing muscles. Although this method is most commonly used in sleep labs, there are also consumer EMG units available. Two units that are available can be found at www.stopgrinding.com and www.bitestrip.com.

Dentists and psychologists do not completely understand the causes of bruxism. In general, psychological causes seem to be the most responsible, including stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration. Personality types may also be a contributing factor. Some studies show that people with aggressive, overly competitive, controlling, or hyperactive personalities have an increased incidence of bruxism. Medications such as antidepressants, stimulants like caffeine, and alcohol have also been attributed to causing bruxism. The misalignment of teeth is also thought to be a contributing factor.

There is no single accepted cure for bruxism. A recognized protocol is to treat the known associated factors (i.e., stress, medications, tooth alignment) along with concurrent bite guard therapy. Professional counseling, meditation, and/or exercise may manage factors such as stress and anxiety. Reducing stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine may also reduce grinding. Dental braces from your orthodontist can correct bite misalignment problems.

Bite guards, also known as night guards or splints, have two purposes. First and foremost, they separate the teeth so if bruxism continues, the wear occurs on the plastic guard and not on the teeth. Second, some bite guard designs have been shown to stop the clenching and grinding habit. Bite guards should be made by your dentist to ensure a proper fit and to make ongoing adjustments when necessary. Beyond bite guard therapy, there are other modalities to treat bruxism

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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including biofeedback, Botox®, and medication.

If allowed to continue, the damage to teeth as a result of bruxism can be devastating. It can change the cosmetics of your smile, the profile of your face, your posture, and change your ability to chew and speak. When this occurs, rebuilding the biting surfaces of your teeth with crowns is often the only solution.

Bruxism can become a very serious and costly dental health problem. It is important to maintain regular dental visits to check if there are any signs of abnormal tooth wear before it becomes a real headache. U