

# Teeth Grinding



The formal medical name for grinding, gnashing, or clenching your teeth is bruxism. It can happen, without you noticing, both day and night, but if it happens while you are asleep then the name is sleep bruxism.

How do you know this is a problem for you? Common symptoms include the following:

- ▶ Noise. Grinding or clenching your teeth can be noisy. It might even be loud enough to wake up the person next to you in bed.
- ▶ Wear and tear. If your teeth are flattened or worn down, or if they have fractures and chips, that could be evidence of the pressure being put on them by your jaws. The same is true if your tooth enamel has been worn away.
- ▶ Loose or lost teeth. Bruxism can lead to tooth loss if you ignore it.
- ▶ Sensitivity. When your teeth become more sensitive than normal, that might be because of tiny cracks in the tooth enamel. These cracks allow extreme temperatures from very hot or very cold food to go through the enamel to the dentin underneath, where you have nerves. Essentially, then, sensitivity is another sign of wear and tear on your teeth.
- ▶ Your jaw muscles feel tight, or they hurt. Maybe they just feel tired.
- ▶ Signs of chewing your cheek inside your mouth, or indentations on your tongue.
- ▶ Earache from the strong contractions of your jaw muscles.
- ▶ Headaches or chronic facial pain.

If the problem is mild, you may want to keep an eye on it without necessarily getting medical care. If it seems more serious, however, then you should definitely talk to your dentist about it. In this particular case, "serious" means you can tell your teeth are being damaged, you are dealing with pain, and you are getting complaints about the noise you make while you are asleep. In particular, you should know that an untreated case of bruxism can cause a temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorder down the road.

Maybe you aren't the problem at all, but you notice that your child is showing signs. In that case, please talk to your dentist about it the next time you take your child to the dentist for a checkup. Although many young children have bruxism, it's good to know that it generally goes away before adolescence.

Dentists and doctors can only speculate what the cause of bruxism is, but they think the causes may be both physical and psychological:

- ▶ You might have a problem with grinding your teeth because you are tense, stressed, or anxious about something else that is going on in your life.
- ▶ Maybe you are frustrated or angry, and you are trying to ignore it.

- ▶ Some people are more aggressive, hyperactive, or competitive than others.
- ▶ Your upper and lower teeth are not aligned correctly.
- ▶ You are dehydrated.
- ▶ You have other sleep problems.
- ▶ You have Huntington's disease, or Parkinson's disease, and this is a side effect.
- ▶ You are taking psychiatric medications (for example, an antidepressant), and this is how it is affecting you.
- ▶ A child might be teething or experiencing an earache.
- ▶ If you smoke, drink caffeinated drinks or alcohol, or take drugs such as ecstasy or methamphetamine, you are more likely to develop bruxism.

When you talk to your dentist about bruxism, the dentist may want to involve your personal doctor and, maybe, a sleep specialist. You should examine everything about your life that might be a contributing factor, such as the amount of stress you are experiencing and any lifestyle changes that might help. The dentist, doctor, and sleep specialist will all focus on finding ways to either reduce or eliminate the problem. For example, if your teeth need to be realigned, or if you've done a lot of damage to your teeth, your dentist will want to address those problems. You might also be asked to wear a splint or a mouth guard, to use biofeedback, and to modify your own behavior through consciously changing the position of your jaw and deliberately keeping your jaws just slightly apart so they can't grind together. A warm washcloth next to your cheek and close to your ear may help you relax tense jaw muscles at night.

You should also be careful not to chew on anything — like a pencil — that was never intended to be in your mouth. And don't chew gum: you don't need to strengthen jaw muscles that are already powerful enough to do some damage.

For many people, their bruxism isn't severe enough to really cause a problem. For everyone else, though, it's good to know that there are quite a few things to try, all of which may make enough of a difference to improve your quality of life and prevent you from doing lasting damage to your teeth and jaw.