

## BRUXISM: CLENCHING AND GRINDING OF THE TEETH

Bruxism (or the grinding of teeth) can cause serious problems. It is a destructive side to side movement of your teeth against each other that differs from the movements that are used in chewing. Clenching (or the vertical squeezing of your teeth) may also cause serious problems. Clenching can occur with or without bruxing.

As much as 1/5 of the population grind their teeth destructively. It may be done to relieve stress, or it may be because one or more teeth do not fit comfortably together. A person may be aware of grinding their teeth during the day, but be unaware of nocturnal (nighttime) grinding. The sounds, though, may be loud enough to wake up their partner.

In normal daytime activities, there is very little contact of your upper and lower teeth. However, nocturnal grinding can generate up to ten times the forces that can be generated during normal chewing. With nocturnal grinding there is no food to cushion the biting forces, and you are not awake to exert any control over the behavior.

The exact cause of bruxism is not completely clear. In some cases, it may be caused by a reaction to stress and anxiety. Certain personality types (such as type A personalities) or lifestyles may be more prone to bruxing. Bruxism can also be caused by the way teeth fit together. Minor discrepancies in tooth positions can trigger the chewing muscles into hyperactivity.

The effects of bruxism, however, are very clear. Teeth can wear down, loosen, crack, snap off or develop hairline cracks. These hairline cracks can feel like a toothache and can be very difficult for the dentist to detect. A patient may also develop headaches similar to migraines, TMJ (temporal mandibular joint) disorders and even soreness in the neck and shoulder muscles.

Several treatments may be available including appliances that deprogram the activity of the muscles, as well as bite splints or occlusal guards that prevent the teeth from contacting each other. Minor tooth adjustments or occlusal bite adjustments to make the teeth fit evenly, may be necessary. These are all designed to minimize the muscle activity and to cushion the teeth from the effects of wearing together. If the cause is stress related, biofeedback, as well as behavioral modification can be beneficial to control bruxism.

Whatever the reason, bruxism can be very harmful to your teeth, temporal mandibular joint and overall health. In the early stages, you may not be aware of any problems. However, your dentist may recognize the signs and symptoms of grinding and recommend treatment to prevent further destruction. If you feel that you may be clenching or grinding your teeth, you should consult a dentist.