

Treating Teeth Grinding

What is tooth grinding?

Chronic tooth and joint pain is a condition that is primarily diagnosed and treated by your Dentist. Given that there are just so many structures around the face that could cause pain (e.g. teeth, ears, sinuses, nerves and glands), it is unfortunate that it takes so long to make the correct diagnosis. Bruxism relates to the excessive clenching and or grinding of your teeth that usually occurs nocturnally. Symptoms are very varied and it can cause pain in muscles that help you chew around your cheeks, pain in the joint that opens and closes your mouth, referred pain into the neck, pain around the eyes and temple regions, ear ache, toothache, tiredness, poor sleep, chipped broken teeth or fillings and tooth wear. This most commonly occurs at times of stress (eg examinations, work or family stress) where the joints are overworked.

What can cause pain?

Stress is the number one reason why patients have non-specific face pain. Acute form (fast onset and high intensity) normally occurs during high stress circumstances often exam times, work related stress, divorce or family deaths. Poor sleeping habits can lead to clenching or grinding of the teeth as the body tries to cope with the stress from the day during your sleep. The muscles often feel tired by the time you wake up. It can often feel like you haven't slept at all with headaches around the temple and ear regions. The eyes may also feel puffy and the joints feel sore. In extreme cases the joint may lock closed as the joint becomes swollen. Immediate treatment is advised to help treat the cause and symptoms to prevent a locked jaw.

In chronic long standing cases, bruxism is a mild annoyance that continues on and off or many years. The joint can develop a click when opening and closing but the grinding continues mildly for many years. The teeth can drift and move out of alignment and wear down. Did you know that during the day the teeth rarely contact only contacting for about 15 minutes. During bruxism this figure is measured in hours not minutes and this substantial change is what causes damage. This has been to cause migraines and tension headaches and these CAN BE TREATED.

What can I do about it?

Please speak to your Dentist who will check your teeth to make sure you don't have toothache chipped or cracked teeth or nerve pain. They will also take a full history about your life, circumstances and origin location duration of the pain. X rays can provide information if there is arthritis affecting the jaw joints (TMJ).

What are my treatment options?

Mild cases can be treated temporarily with a list of non-invasive options. You may try the following to see if they help reduce your symptoms. This may help your case but not necessarily resolve your problem:

1. Non steroidal anti inflammatory drugs such as Ibuprofen taken low dose daily to reduce the inflammation in the joint
2. Stop chewing gum or eating chewy foods
3. Cold packs on the joint or hot packs on the muscles
4. Keep the teeth apart, do not clench during the day and try avoid habits such as biting pens, finger nails. To break the habit, you could train yourself to relax your jaw when you feel yourself grinding or clenching. For example, you could open your jaw slightly or gently place your tongue between your upper and lower teeth.
5. Jaw exercises
6. There are a number of things you can do to help you wind down before you go to bed. Exercises during the day. In the evening take a hot bath or shower and read a book before bed. Take could choose to take up yoga or start breathing exercises.

What is a Splint?

Mouth guards and mouth splints are either upper hard or lower bendy rubber that fits your mouth very similar to a sports guard. These even out the pressure across your jaw and create a physical barrier between your upper and lower teeth to protect them from further damage. They can also reduce any grinding noises you make at night.

A short upper splint can be made on the same day to fit the upper front teeth at times of severe pain, to help diagnosis and to open a locked jaw. This is not intended to be used for long term.

There are two types of splints. One is a soft gum shield worn covering all the lower teeth at night. The second is a hard upper bite guard also worn at night. It is much more protective features but is not as comfortable.

A lower soft splint can help most of our patients to manage their jaw pain and grinding over longer time periods. The splint is usually worn at night for 2-3 weeks followed by a week's rest without the splint to allow the teeth to come back into bite. Bring this in with you so that your dentist can assess how much you are grinding your teeth.

The gold standard is to use a hard upper plastic splint that fits precisely over your upper teeth. This is worn every night for life. This is larger and more uncomfortable to tolerate.

Although mouth guards and splints may help reduce muscle activity in your jaw at night, they're only able to control the condition, prevent damage and pain but not cure it. Jaw pain can be debilitating to those that suffer. Relief is available to those that seek treatment and please remember that we are here to help you.