

Bruxism and clenching



GERBER DENTAL GROUP
BURLEIGH HEADS

The term bruxism refers to a condition where a person rubs their teeth together with a great deal of pressure – usually when they are not aware of it, while they are asleep. People can also clench and grind their teeth to some degree during their waking hours, but because they are awake they are usually able to notice it and stop doing it. Nocturnal grinding tends to be a very big problem for several reasons:

- The person doesn't realize they are doing it and sometimes don't even believe it when they are told.
- There is accelerated wear of their teeth and a dramatically increased risk of cracked tooth syndrome, chipped or broken fillings, crowns, inlays, etc.
- Patients think that the dentist has done poor quality work because their filling or crown has broken or because it keeps breaking after it has been 'fixed'.
- Jaw joint and facial pain can develop from the excessive forces and from the changes induced by the excessive wear.
- Long term damage to the jaw joint can occur and is often difficult to treat and manage.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BRUXISM?

If you are a bruxer you can expect a lifetime of problems with your teeth. The most common problem is accelerated wear. You will find that wherever you rub your teeth together a flat patch will develop – this can result in your smile having a wavy line on the edges of the teeth due to the fact that your bottom jaw swings across and cuts a path through the opposing top teeth - usually on one side more than the other. You will also find your front teeth become worn down and have sharp, square corners, not round corners, and that they lose their individual appearance. The back teeth can lose the cusp tips and become flat, level surfaces. As a result, the food is not broken up as effectively and requires more chewing.

Another problem with bruxism is that it can damage any fillings or crowns you have, just as it damages your own teeth. Be wary of blaming your dentist for broken fillings, worn fillings or vertical cracks in your root treated teeth because most of the time it will be the bruxism that causes your dental problems. Also, your jaw joints may become traumatized due to the extreme forces that can be applied during your sleep. It has been estimated that the forces that can be applied to the teeth during your sleeping hours can be as much as 3 to 10 times more than those that you can apply if you clench as hard as you can while you are awake. The reason for this is that the protective reflexes that normally operate during consciousness, for some reason, do not appear to operate during sleep. Why the muscles tense and the grinding pattern happens is not well known, but there does appear to be a correlation with stress – much like biting finger nails. Once you are a bruxer you are likely to do it all your life.

IS THERE ANY CURE TO BEING A BRUXER?

In a word, no, but there may be long periods where you do not brux, and sometimes the condition goes away on its own. But for most people, once a bruxer always a bruxer, and it is only a matter of to what degree.

WHAT CAN I DO TO LESSEN THE DAMAGE ASSOCIATED WITH BRUXING?

1. Choose strong restorative options. For example, choose a ceramic crown, rather than a composite restoration.

2. Where you are grinding your back teeth make sure all your large fillings have cusp protection, i.e. a filling that locks the cusps together, or a crown or an onlay that overlays the cusps and holds them together like a hat placed on the head. This will pay big dividends later in life because the cracks that form underneath fillings usually grow to cause the breakage of the tooth.

3. Maintain immaculate oral hygiene. You do not want to have fillings due to decay, because they provide a focal point for a crack to start and to propagate from. Also, you do not want to lose teeth because the replacement implants or bridge will be at greater stress and risk of failure, particularly in the weaker bone in the top jaw. Do everything necessary to keep your teeth - have regular 6 monthly checkups and be fastidious about tooth brushing and interproximal plaque removal, i.e. clean the gap with floss and/or interproximal brushes.

4. Get your enamel replaced as soon as it wears away – the inner core of the tooth (called dentine) wears at a faster rate. You need all the wear resistance you can get and any dentine that is exposed will wear like wood compared to the enamel, which wears like glass.

5. Get a splint or oral appliance made. This may reduce the actual subconscious urge to grind by throwing a “spanner” into the neuro-muscular complex responsible for the grinding initiation. Even if you do grind the splint tends to take the stress and wear, rather than your teeth. The splint also evens the pressure out so that particular teeth are not being targeted and worn down excessively. The splint will be made specifically for your jaw position and will also protect the jaw joint from further damage.

6. Try to live a less stressful lifestyle. We say this almost ‘tongue-in-cheek’ because we know that often you are locked into a certain way of life and it is impossible or impracticable to change. Maybe you can accept some bruxism for a certain period of time with a plan to eventually change your life when circumstances permit.

IF I GET SYMPTOMS IN MY EARS, NECK, FACE OR JAW JOINT, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Because of the extreme stress caused to the jaw joint by bruxism, you can get a multitude of strange symptoms develop. These include frequent headaches of unexplained origin, clicking and popping of the jaw joint when chewing or opening, ringing in the ears, pain in the jaw joint itself, sometimes radiating to the neck or side of the face. These symptoms are obviously more debilitating and may require more aggressive therapy. We may recommend a neuromuscular test to diagnose and manage your jaw joint symptoms if they are sufficiently severe to warrant it, however, many people have mild symptoms as described above and just manage them conservatively. The symptoms of bruxism can go away in a matter of days and you can avoid the expense of specialist treatment just by knowing that you don't have a dreadful disease and that this bruxism is a common problem. You should call us if you are at all concerned or if your symptoms are getting worse.