



Do You Grind Your Teeth?

A good percentage of people have paroxysmal activity in their mouth at night or even in some cases during the day. Some people grind their teeth against each other causing major damage to the dentition, while others clench their teeth causing painful headaches or sore muscles. And some do a combination of both. The odd thing is, the grinder or clincher is often unaware of this bad habit. We have even found this phenomenon in children. There are some methods of treating this problem that can save wear and tear on the teeth.

The most common paroxysmal activity we find is grinding of the teeth. The grinder will present with all or some of the following symptoms:

- spouse complains of grinding noise at night
- headaches, especially upon waking in the morning
- popping, grinding, or pain of the TMJ (temporomandibular joint located just in front of the ear)
- facial muscle soreness, soreness in the neck, shoulders and upper back
- malocclusion, where the teeth no longer come together correctly
- excessive callous tissue on the cheeks from cheek biting
- tooth pain or sensitivity
- premature failing of dental restorations
- cracking of the teeth
- mild to severe wear of the chewing surfaces of the teeth.

In some cases the only sign of grinding is the wear of the teeth (which is noticed in the dental chair) and the patient is unaware of the problem.

Clenching of the teeth is less traumatic to the dentition, but can cause some severe muscle and TMJ soreness. It can also cause frequent headaches. The clencher may clench during the day during periods of stress or deep thought/concentration as well as at night.

What causes all this activity that is so detrimental to the head and neck? Overwhelmingly the number one cause is stress. One may note that this type of activity will only surface in stressful situations. In those with typical type A personalities, stress can be a way of life! And even kids are affected by stress today. We are seeing more and more children who are grinding their teeth in response to stress such as broken homes; busy schedules; and high expectations from parents, teachers, and peers.

So what can we do? Obviously decreasing the stress in one's life should take priority. Stress causes all kinds of medical problems in addition to dental ones. In addition, there is a dental lab fabricated splint that one can wear that separates the teeth during the typical grinding period of the day or night. This occlusal guard does two things. 1) It separates the teeth with plastic to prevent enamel wear, and 2) it places the teeth and joints in an ideal position in an attempt to stop the muscles from continuing their bad habits. Sometimes muscle relaxants, anti-inflammatory medicines, and massage are used in conjunction with this treatment. In severe cases of TMJ involvement, surgery is indicated.

Bottom line: if you have any of these symptoms see your dentist for possible treatment options. And try to relax!

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