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BRUXISM: What Patients Need To Know

Have you ever awakened in the morning with soreness in your jaw or with an earache, headache, neck or shoulder pain? Have you ever broken a tooth when biting into a soft piece of food? Have you ever experienced cold or sweet sensitivity in your teeth that seemed to disappear as quickly as it came without any apparent reason? Or have you noticed the biting edges of your front teeth becoming flatter and straighter across than they used to be? Well, these are all common experiences associated with bruxism, or tooth grinding.

Bruxism is prevalent in 80-90% of the adult population and occurs in equal numbers of men and women. It only varies in the degree, frequency and time of occurrence during the day or night. There can be numerous episodes throughout the night, each lasting up to five minutes. These episodes commonly occur during the transition from a deeper sleep into a lighter one. Consequently, if you do not sleep well and there are more of these transition periods, the frequency of your bruxing may increase. Audible sounds from teeth grinding together are only heard 20% of the time. It is most interesting to note that only 10% of adults are aware they brux.

Three ideas have evolved to explain why so many of us unconsciously grind our teeth. The first and most highly supported cause is our state of mind. High levels of bruxism appear to correlate with emotionally stressful days or in anticipation of stressful events. Secondly, bruxism has been linked to systemic influences from alcohol and some medication. It is theorized that bruxism is the body's attempt to correct a misalignment between your teeth and your jaw joint. Although this is ultimately important in regard to the consequences of bruxism, it is not likely the most important cause.

Since the strongest component for the cause of bruxism is stress and how we subsequently deal with it, bruxism cannot generally be stopped permanently. We can, however, ensure that the damage done to the teeth, the jaw joint or TMJ (like popping or clicking noises), or to the muscles and the gums is limited. We can do this by wearing a "nightguard" during our sleep. The nightguard needs to fit precisely. The surface must be flat and very hard, permitting the jaw to slide freely. It is of utmost importance that the nightguard design allows the jaw joints to align correctly when the teeth are biting against the nightguard. It must allow contacts between all teeth and the nightguard surface to be of equal intensity.

What can happen if I don't wear a nightguard?

Think about this for a moment. Have you ever driven a car with the front end out of alignment? Or have you ever wondered why your new tires need to be balanced? This analogy applies to your teeth and your jaw joints as well. Aligning the front end of your car and balancing the tires ultimately ensures relatively even wear on your tires. Similarly, aligning and harmonizing the fit of your teeth and jaw joints, where contact between teeth is of equal intensity, results in less damage to any one particular tooth because the pressure is spread evenly among all of your teeth. It means less damage to the jaw joint and reduced or eliminated discomfort of the jaw and neck muscles and therefore fewer headaches. Just as the car needs contact with the road to show that the alignment or tire balance is off, your teeth need to grind against each other in order for you to realize the associated symptoms.

Does this mean everyone should wear a nightguard?

No. First, you need to assess the jaw joints, muscles and teeth for damage. If little or none exists, you need not concern yourself with a nightguard. However, because many of the materials used for restorative or esthetic dental work are susceptible to breaking if overloaded, we need to pay particular concern to the issue of bruxism. You eat well because you are proactive about your health. Similarly, you should be proactive about your jaw/tooth alignment because it will ultimately mean less wear, more comfort and better looking teeth for a longer time.