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Tooth grinding: are you self-destructing?

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Some people habitually grind their teeth – often as a way of releasing stress. Dentists call this 'bruxing'. Both children and adults do this, almost always at night. Bruxing can deform the natural shape of teeth, but there are several things that can be done to restore the damage.



Before



After

● The grinding habit

Bruxing or tooth grinding is a common stress-linked habit that affects all ages. Children often grind their teeth, but usually stop before reaching their teens. However, many adults continue grinding throughout their lives. Some bruxers may grind only sporadically when they feel increased life stress. Others grind as a continuous way of dispelling their troubles. Since this is usually a nocturnal habit, a person may be unaware of the problem until his or her sleeping partner points it out or the dentist realises that the habit is damaging their teeth.

● Grinding speeds the ageing process

Grinding makes the teeth less effective for chewing. It also makes the face look prematurely old. Teeth naturally wear as you age, but nervous grinding accelerates this habit and can make people look years older than they really are. When dentists restore the form and shape of teeth, they instantaneously rejuvenate both the smile and the face.

● What signs suggest that you are a 'grinder'?

Your teeth look worn down

Look at the biting surfaces of your teeth, particularly the upper and lower front teeth. Have they become short, 'stubby' and flat? Do the front teeth look the same length? If so, they are wearing down prematurely.

Your jaw muscles are sore

If you sometimes wake up with painful or sore jaw muscles, you may be grinding your teeth at night. If you are a habitual and continuous grinder, your jaw chewing muscles will become unduly prominent (which is called the 'Schwarzenegger' effect).

Your teeth are unusually sensitive

In some cases your teeth will be rather sore and oversensitive to hot or cold temperatures. The pressure on the roots has sensitised them.

Grinding noises disturb your sleeping partner

The sound of grinding teeth during the night can be very off-putting to your sleeping partner and prevent him or her from getting proper rest. This can be one of your first indications that something is wrong.

● The consequences of tooth grinding

Destruction of tooth enamel

The enamel on your teeth is hard, but will wear down when rubbed against itself – just as diamonds will abrade other diamonds. Your teeth are naturally different in length but tooth grinding wears them down to similar length.

Loss of protection

The pointy 'canine' teeth protect your other teeth. When you move your teeth sideways across each other (as in a grinding motion), the lower canines ride up onto the tips of the upper canines and create distance for other teeth. Canine teeth that are the same length as all others cannot prevent tooth friction and wear.

A prematurely aged look

Unusually even and flat teeth make the smile look much older than it should.

● What are the possibilities for treatment?

If you think that you grind your teeth, talk to a stress management counsellor to deal with the causes of your stress. Sometimes an unbalanced bite contributes to the problem. A well-trained and experienced dentist will be able to check this and make adjustments to correct your bite.

A customized plastic tooth guard, to be worn at night, can instantly ease the damage caused by grinding. Clinically, a better solution is to restore the canine tips that protect the other teeth. Where the front incisor teeth are also worn down, it is sensible to lengthen these as well. Otherwise the longer canine teeth can result in a somewhat 'vampire' look.

● Can you turn back the clock?

Definitely! Restoring your teeth's form and shape to their natural proportions will instantly rejuvenates your face and smile. It is done in several steps:

Plan out the treatment

The dentist diagnoses and evaluates the extent of tooth wear, its prime causes and aesthetic effects. A group of teeth is selected for treatment.

Restore shape and function

A colour-matched material (quartz composite) is temporarily bonded onto the worn teeth to restore their function, form and aesthetics. This procedure, called a Dental Mock-Up, can be left in place for a few weeks to establish comfort and appearance (see mock-up article).

Restore hard-wearing qualities

Once the patient confirms that everything feels and looks good, the mock-up teeth are copied and replaced with hard-wearing porcelain veneers. These are indistinguishable from natural tooth enamel. Before the porcelain restorations are placed, many patients elect to whiten all their teeth. So the veneer colour is matched to the lighter coloured natural teeth.

The final result is a set of teeth that look better, make the face younger and protect against further tooth-grinding damage.

Restoring the teeth's natural looks and protection will reverse the effects of tooth grinding or 'bruxing'. It will also have a strong rejuvenating effect on the smile.

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