

## BRUXISM AND CLENCHING

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 gnash their teeth to some degree during waking hours, but because they are awake they usually notice and stop. Night grinding tends to be a very big problem in dentistry 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 teeth, fillings, crowns 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'.
- Headaches, jaw joint and facial pain often develop from the excessive forces and from the changes induced by the excessive wear.

## 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 due to the large forces we can generate from clenching and/or grinding. This can result in an uneven smile due to tooth wear and sharp or rough teeth as well as an 'overclosed' jaw which can make a person look much older than they are. Bruxism can also cause broken fillings, worn fillings or vertical cracks which can lead to problems with the nerve in the tooth and consequently extreme pain. Jaw joints may also become traumatised and inflamed due to extreme forces that can be applied during sleep, as much as 3 to 10 times more than while you are awake. Why the muscles tense and the grinding pattern happens is not well known, but there is a correlation with stress, much like biting your fingernails. Once you are a bruxer you are likely to do it all your life.

## IS THERE A CURE FOR BRUXISM?

In a word, no, but there may be periods when you do not brux, for instance when you are on holidays and more relaxed. Being aware of clenching or grinding is half the battle, once aware of a grinding habit, it is easier to control during the day, however at night it is impossible to stop.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO LESSEN THE DAMAGE ASSOCIATED WITH BRUXISM?

- Choose strong restorative options and begin preventative measures, for example:
- Get tooth enamel replaced as soon as it wears away, the next layer of tooth under the enamel, the dentine, is much softer and therefore wears at a faster rate.
- In places where visibility is not an issue, choose the strongest material, eg. Inlays, crowns or amalgam fillings.
- Make sure back teeth with large fillings have cusp protection ie a filling that locks the cusps together, or a crown or inlay that holds the tooth together like a barrel over a weakened stump.

- Get a splint made. This may reduce the actual subconscious urge to grind by throwing a 'spanner' into the neuro-muscular complex responsible for the grinding. Even if you do grind the splint tends to take the stress and wear, rather than your teeth. The splint also evens out the pressure so that particular teeth are not being targeted and worn down excessively.
- 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 this places greater stress on the remaining teeth. Have regular 6 monthly appointments and be fastidious with brushing and flossing.
- Do not 'play' with a sore or noisy jaw joint as this will only aggravate the problem.
- Try to lead a less stressful lifestyle.

#### IF I GET STRANGE 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 eating 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 refer you to a specialist dentist for management of your jaw joint symptoms if they are sufficiently severe to warrant it, however, most 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 what the problem is. Please call your dentist if you are concerned the symptoms are getting worse.