



The Link Between Clenching, Grinding and Headaches

Did you know that when you grind or clench your teeth it affects your jaw joints and jaw muscles? When you grind or clench, the muscles that open and close your jaw can become painful from overuse, causing a range of symptoms from muscle soreness to migraine headaches. Fortunately, there now is a solution with the help of a nighttime bite splint or night guard.

Dentists have traditionally focused on the early tooth wear caused by grinding and clenching. As many as one-third of the U. S. population wear their teeth significantly more than normal. These “grinders” can develop pain to temperatures of certain foods and drinks, and their teeth become more prone to fractures and breakage. For most people, this wear will not be visually evident until later in life when many end up needing dental work to restore their teeth to their original function.

Grinding or clenching teeth is defined as abnormal tooth contact. Ordinarily, teeth are in contact while eating and swallowing, only about 10 to 15 minutes on a daily basis. People who grind or clench their teeth during the day, or while sleeping, can have their teeth in heavy contact for as much as six hours a day! This is why researchers say that one night of grinding is equal to 80 days of normal wear on your teeth. The American Dental Association estimates that 95% of the American population suffers from a grinding or clenching condition at some point in their lives. Some people may do so much damage to their front teeth that they appear to have no teeth at all when they smile.

When the teeth are severely worn down, the vertical height between the upper and lower jaw is reduced. Wrinkles appear around the lips and cheeks as a result of the jaws coming closer together. Cosmetic restorations can renew a smile that has been damaged by clenching or grinding if the new teeth can be protected for the future. This is where the night guard comes in, because with a properly made bite splint, the inevitable destruction of the teeth can be slowed or be prevented completely.

A bite splint is a hard appliance that fits onto your teeth and protects them when you clench or grind. It also is custom made so that your jaw joints, jaw muscles, and the fitting together of your teeth are in balance with each other. This is what keeps your muscles from working overtime, becoming sore, and having headaches. When my patients have worn a bite splint for a few months, they are always amazed at how many “divots” and “troughs” are in their new splint due to the pressure of clenching and grinding. Then they say, “just think this is what would be happening to my teeth!” Another sign of premature wearing of teeth is the exposure of the slightly yellow inside part of the tooth, especially on the chewing or biting edge. In addition, check for little V-

shaped notches by running your finger across the gum line on the cheek sides of your teeth. These kinds of breakdown of the teeth can be very sensitive and painful to cold drinks, because the protective layer of tooth enamel has been broken or worn away.

Ask your dentist to check your teeth for the signs of clenching and grinding. Today's dentistry and care can help anyone deal effectively with these conditions and allow you to enjoy life at its fullest!

Dr. Foltz practices dentistry in Norcross, GA and can be reached at (770) 449-0099.