



The Link Between Clenching, Headaches and Tooth Wear

There is a link between nighttime tooth grinding and headaches. For people who grind or clench, the muscles that open and close the jaw can become painful from overuse, causing a range of symptoms that include tension headaches. Fortunately, headache sufferers may now find relief with the use of an occlusal guard (nightguard).

Dentistry has traditionally focused on the premature 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 sensitivity to temperature and certain foods, and their teeth become more prone to fractures. 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.

Bruxing (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 equivalent 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. Porcelain restorations can renew a smile that has been damaged by clenching or grinding. However, if the condition is diagnosed early enough, the inevitable destruction of the teeth can be slowed, or prevented completely by use of an occlusal guard or nightguard.

A nightguard is a hard or soft appliance that fits onto your teeth and keeps them from coming into contact with each other if you grind or clench your teeth, thereby preventing tooth damage. One of the advantages of wearing a guard is that the treatment is completely reversible, since it can be removed from the mouth at any time. No other treatment protects as inexpensively as a nightguard.

When you are seen in our office, your teeth are inspected for the signs of clenching and grinding. There may be premature wearing of enamel that causes the underlying layer of tooth (dentin) to be exposed. Check for those V-shaped notches by running your finger across the gum line on the cheek sides of your teeth. These notches, previously thought to be caused by tooth brushing, are called “abfractions”, and are dramatic signs of overload of the teeth. Routine use of a nightguard, as well as reinforcement with bonding material when necessary, can help you maintain those teeth!