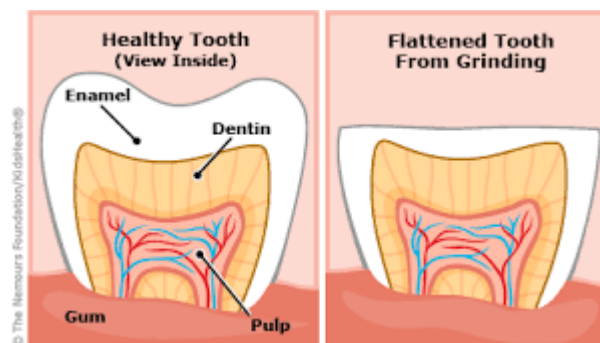


From the Health Clinic



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Bruxism (Teeth Grinding or Clenching)

When you look in on your sleeping child, you want to hear the sounds of sweet dreams: easy breathing and perhaps an occasional sigh. But some parents hear the harsher sounds of gnashing and grinding teeth, called **bruxism**, which is common in children.

About Bruxism

Bruxism is the medical term for the grinding of teeth or the clenching of jaws. Many children have it (2 to 3 out of every 10 will grind or clench, experts say), but most outgrow it. Bruxism often happens during deep sleep phases or when children are under stress.

Causes of Bruxism

Experts aren't always sure why bruxism happens. In some cases, children may grind because the top and bottom teeth are not aligned properly. Others do it as a response to pain, such as from an earache or teething. Children might grind their teeth as a way to ease the pain, just as they might rub a sore muscle. Many children outgrow these fairly common causes for grinding.

Stress - usually nervous tension or anger - is another cause. For instance, a child might worry about a test at school or a change in routine (a new sibling or a new teacher). Even arguing with parents and siblings can cause enough stress to prompt teeth grinding or jaw clenching.

Some children who are hyperactive also have bruxism. And sometimes children with other medical conditions (such as cerebral palsy) or who take certain medicines can develop bruxism.

Effects of Bruxism

Many cases of bruxism go undetected with no ill effects, while others cause headaches or earaches. Usually, though, it is more bothersome to other family members because of the grinding sound.

In some cases, nighttime grinding and clenching can wear down tooth enamel, chip teeth, increase temperature sensitivity, and cause severe facial pain and jaw problems, such as temporomandibular joint disease (TMJ). Most children who grind their teeth, however, do not have TMJ problems unless their grinding and clenching happen a lot.

Diagnosing Bruxism

Lots of children who grind their teeth are not even aware of it, so it is often siblings or parents who identify the problem.

Some signs to watch for:

- grinding noises when your child is sleeping
- complaints of a sore jaw or face after waking up in the morning
- pain with chewing

If you think your child is grinding his or her teeth, visit the dentist, who will examine the teeth for chipped enamel and unusual wear and tear, and spray air and water on the teeth to check for unusual sensitivity.

If damage is found, the dentist may ask your child a few questions, such as:

- How do you feel before bed?
- Are you worried about anything at home or school?
- Are you angry with someone?
- What do you do before bed?

The exam will help the dentist see whether the cause is anatomical (misaligned teeth) or psychological (stress), and come up with an effective treatment plan.

Treating Bruxism

Most children outgrow bruxism, but a combination of parental observation and dental visits can help keep the problem in check until they do.

In cases where the grinding and clenching make a child's face and jaw sore or damage the teeth, dentists may prescribe a special night guard. Molded to a child's teeth, the night guard is similar

to the protective mouthpieces worn by athletes. Though a mouthpiece can take some getting used to, positive results happen quickly.

Helping Children with Bruxism

Whether the cause is physical or psychological, children might be able to control bruxism by relaxing before bedtime - for example, by taking a warm bath or shower, listening to a few minutes of soothing music, or reading a book.

For bruxism that's caused by stress, ask about what's upsetting your child and find a way to help. For example, a kid who is worried about being away from home for a first camping trip might need reassurance that mom or dad will be nearby if needed.

If the issue is more complicated, such as moving to a new town, discuss your child's concerns and try to ease any fears. If you are concerned, talk to your doctor.

In rare cases, basic stress relievers are not enough to stop bruxism. If your child has trouble sleeping or is acting differently than usual, your dentist or doctor may suggest further evaluation. This can help find the cause of the stress and a proper course of treatment.

How Long Does Bruxism Last?

Most kids stop grinding when they lose their baby teeth. However, a few kids do continue to grind into adolescence. And if the bruxism is caused by stress, it will continue until the stress eases.

Preventing Bruxism

Because some bruxism is a child's natural reaction to growth and development, most cases cannot be prevented. Stress - induced bruxism can be avoided, though. So talk with children regularly about their feelings and help them deal with stress. Taking children for routine dental visits can help find and treat bruxism.

