

Bruxism bites: I'm grinding my teeth in my sleep ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My mom tells me that when I'm sleeping, I grind my teeth... is this serious? Is it caused by stress? How can I stop this from happening?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Almost everyone grinds or clenches her or his teeth at one time or another. But some people do this regularly (either when sleeping or when awake), a condition referred to as bruxism which can cause a number of symptoms, including:

- Headaches
- Earaches
- Stiff or painful jaw joints
- Permanent tooth damage
- Teeth that are worn down or flattened on the tips
- Chipped teeth
- Increasingly sensitive teeth
- Worn tooth enamel
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Insomnia

Of the people who grind their teeth regularly, some people experience these symptoms while others don't. Some might not even notice that they do it and find out when others hear the grinding, which sounds like it might be the case for you. It appears that certain factors, such as stress levels, posture, diet, sleeping habits, teeth alignment, certain disorders and medications, and how tightly you clench/grind, may influence the likelihood of experiencing pain or symptoms more so than others.

In many cases, children who grind their teeth grow out of the behavior and many adults do not suffer from severe cases of bruxism. However, if you have significant pain, treatment can include

a number of self-help activities as well as medical intervention. Some steps you can take to reduce pain from grinding your teeth include:

- Avoiding eating hard foods or chewing gum
- Drinking plenty of water daily
- Getting adequate sleep.
- Using hot or cold compresses on jaw muscles
- Using physical therapy stretches for facial muscles and joints
- Getting head, neck, face, and shoulder massage
- Practicing relaxation techniques (both physical to relax face and jaw muscles and stress-reduction strategies)

Using mouth guards or splints that cover the teeth may prevent tooth damage. In some cases, orthodontic treatment may be utilized to adjust or correct your bite alignment. Behavioral therapy to learn proper jaw and mouth position may also prove beneficial. Surgery is regarded as a last resort if all other treatment methods fail to bring relief. Looking to avoid the grind? Avoiding any caffeine or tobacco in the evening, adopting stress reduction activities, and keeping up with regular dental exams are all recommended prevention strategies.

Though bruxism is not typically considered a serious condition, it can result in damage to your teeth, headaches, and jaw or ear pain. If you suspect your nighttime gnashing is causing any of the described symptoms, after an examination, a health care provider or dentist can rule out any other medical issues and help you explore treatment options. Meeting with a health care provider should help you relay your fears about teeth grinding and allow you and your mom to sleep peacefully!

Alice!

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