

Give Yourself and Your Teeth a Break

Regular dental exams help detect nighttime tooth grinding

Coming up in early March, National Sleep Awareness Week helps promote the importance of getting a good night's sleep. In conjunction, Northeast Delta Dental is raising awareness of one of the lesser-known effects of sleep deprivation: sleep bruxism—more commonly known as tooth grinding.

Sleep bruxism is an unconscious grinding of teeth during sleep, commonly associated with sleep deprivation, stress, or misalignment of teeth. Depending on its severity, bruxism may damage teeth and cause pain and discomfort.

“Tooth grinding wears down biting surfaces of teeth; and, in chronic cases, can lead to fracturing, loosening, or even loss of teeth,” says Northeast Delta Dental’s Vice President, Professional Relations and Science, Shannon Mills, DDS.

Sleep bruxism is common in children—especially just after the growth of baby and adult teeth. Childhood sleep bruxism is also linked to stress, but may be more closely tied to the uneven alignment of new teeth as they erupt through the gum line. Most children grow out of their teeth grinding habits by adolescence. If you think your child may be a tooth-grinder, mention it at his or her next checkup so a dentist can assess damage.

Since sleep bruxism is an unconscious behavior, diagnosis can be tricky. So how do you know if you’re a sleep bruxer?



The most common symptoms are dull headaches or earaches, soreness of jawbone or muscles, and chipped or worn teeth. Often a bruxer’s sleep partner will hear grinding and may even be kept awake.

“Regular dental exams are the best way to detect bruxism,” says Mills. “It is much easier to find and correct an issue than to fix a damaged tooth.”

If untreated, bruxism can lead to more serious conditions, such as temporomandibular joint disorders (TMJ), characterized by intense jaw pain, locking or popping the jaw joint, and an inability to open the mouth wide.

Fortunately, sleep bruxism can be treated. The National Sleep Foundation suggests winding down before going to bed to give your muscles time to fully relax. Applying a warm compress to jaw muscles before bed can also help. If necessary, a dentist can fit sleep bruxers with a nighttime mouth guard to cushion teeth during sleep.

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