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INFORMATION BULLETIN

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ARE YOU JUST A LITTLE TOO SENSITIVE? Solutions for Sensitive Teeth and Sore Jaws

It's hard to imagine how one tiny tooth can make your life miserable.... even harder to imagine a whole mouthful of teeth that sting when you consume hot, cold, sour or sweet food or beverages. Sensitive teeth are not all that rare and can be the symptom of an underlying condition.

Dr. Bill Sharun, an Edmonton dentist and past president of the Alberta Dental Association and College, says there are many causes for tooth sensitivity. "A common cause is people clenching or grinding their teeth. They may do this because of a deep over-bite, allergies, lack of sleep or improper diet, but the most common cause is stress."

The grinding may cause a notching at the neck of the tooth that can lead to gum recession, inflammation of the gums and tooth decay as the tooth's natural insulation is eroded away. In severe case, the actual enamel is worn off the chewing surfaces of the tooth and the dentin or underlying layer is exposed. This can lead to chipping and fracturing of the tooth structure. "Some people clench so hard that they decrease the blood supply to the tooth, which can lead to tooth abcess or loss," said Dr. Sharun.

The abnormal pressure from constant clenching and grinding can cause problems in the jaw joint (temporal mandibular joint) including pain, clicking, cracking and reduced mobility. Clenching can put pressure on a nerve behind the joint that can lead to headaches in the eye, behind the eye and into the temple area. It can also put pressure on the middle ear that can cause hearing impairment, dizzy spells and ringing in the ears. The head, neck and shoulder area can be affected by clenching, sometimes to the point that the pain in the chest can mimic a heart attack.

"The whole body is connected," said Dr. Sharun, "and the mouth is one of the pivotal points in the body. What begins as a small irritation can mushroom into a big health problem over time."

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Fortunately, dentists can help: in the short term, by administering a high concentration of fluoride along the gum line and recommending toothpastes specific to sensitivity, and in the long term, by tackling the cause. An over-bite can be corrected with ortho-gnathic surgery. People with jaw joint symptoms are prescribed a dental appliance for sleeping; it is similar to a sports mouthguard, but is thinner and easier to wear. "That way, even if the person continues to grind his or her teeth, they are grinding against plastic, not their own tooth enamel. Appliances can also reduce the incidence and severity of headaches in 70 percent of cases." Dental care and treatment may be supplemented with a referral to physiotherapy, or diet or psychological counselling.

Other causes of sensitive teeth have easier fixes. Some people brush their teeth too hard or use toothbrushes with hard bristles. Proper brushing and the use of soft or ultra-soft brushes are recommended. Teeth sensitivity can stem from whitening or tartar-fighting toothpastes, though these effects are generally reversible. People who see a non-professional to have their teeth whitened or bleached can also acquire sensitivity; it is highly recommended that a qualified professional perform all oral treatments.

"Dentists are trained to evaluate oral health and recognize oral symptoms. If there are changes in a person's mouth, we try to find out what is happening in a person's life that might cause the symptom to emerge, and then work with the patient to resolve the symptom and the cause."

For further information on sensitive teeth, sore jaws and other oral health topics, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca or Canadian Dental Association <http://www.cda-adc.ca>.

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