

Put that

Grinding

to a Halt

Work. School. Family. Mortgage payments. The everyday occurrences that make up a life can be very stressful. Stress is the body's reaction to any stimulus that disturbs mental or physical health or normal functioning. It can be caused by illness, pain, emotional upset, or such external factors as the loss of a job or the death of a family member or close friend. And in today's busy society, stress affects everyone. Stress can rear its ugly head and result in many health conditions, such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular conditions, insomnia, weight loss or weight gain, suppressed immune system, stomach ulcers, anxiety disorders, and depression. But there is another side effect of stress that you might not be aware of and it's right at the tip—or more correctly, the sides—of your tongue.

If you find yourself waking up in the morning with a headache or a sore jaw, or if you find yourself clenching your teeth during the day, you could be suffering from a condition called *bruxism*, the clinical term for grinding your teeth. Many times, the grinding takes place when you sleep, so you may not even be aware that you are doing it. For some people, the grinding can be loud enough to wake up their sleep partners—or themselves—and for others, the grinding can be completely silent and the only indications that they are doing this are the inexplicable headaches and jaw pain they experience or their dentist's finding that their teeth appear worn down.

Besides causing discomfort, bruxism can damage the temporomandibular joints, the joints on either side

of the mouth that connect the lower jaw to the skull. Additionally, the force from grinding and clenching can sometimes cause teeth to crack or fracture, and when the tooth's enamel is worn away—which happens from the constant rubbing of tooth on tooth—the underlying layer, called *dentin*, is exposed and can lead to increased tooth sensitivity.

Bruxism can develop at any age; pain or discomfort from colds, ear infections, or allergies may even cause children to grind their teeth. Also, bruxism can be present at times other than during sleep. If you bite your fingernails, chew on pencils or pens, or clench your jaw while playing a sport or exercising, you could also be suffering from bruxism.

Sometimes, grinding can be caused by an abnormal bite, in which the teeth do not fit together well. If this is the case, your dentist can render treatment by reducing the “high spots” on one or more teeth to level the bite. For severe cases, your dentist may recommend reshaping or reconstructing the bite surface using inlays or crowns.

Regular dental checkups are helpful in detecting the condition in its early stages. Your dentist can then recommend a course of treatment, which may include a custom-made nightguard to be worn during sleep. The nightguard fits over the teeth on one jaw and acts as a buffer between the upper and lower teeth, absorbing the pressure of biting and preventing further damage to the tooth surface. If you're a daytime grinder, your dentist may also advise you as to how to change your “resting” jaw behavior. For some people, the simple awareness

of the grinding—which previously may have been performed subconsciously—and the instruction to rest their tongue upward with teeth apart and lips closed may be enough to alter their behavior and correct the problem, according to the Academy of General Dentistry.

And if good old stress is the cause of the grinding, it may be advisable to look at ways to help alleviate that stress, such as exercising or taking a relaxing bath. If you're having trouble handling stress, you may want to speak to your doctor about more effective ways to deal with stressful situations.

It's important to remember that most people grind their teeth at one time or another. But if you find that your grinding becomes the norm rather than the exception, you should schedule an appointment with your dentist. 

