



Fighting TOOTH and NAIL to Preserve Your Oral Health



If you've ever found yourself absentmindedly nibbling on your fingernails while talking on the phone, watching a suspenseful movie, or staring at the blank page on your computer screen, you could be doing damage to more than just your manicure. Nail biting is more than just a nervous habit; it's a habit that could potentially damage your teeth and gums.

Nail biting places a great amount of pressure on the front teeth, which could eventually lead to worn-down or chipped teeth and cracked enamel. If the damage is severe enough, you could require dental restorations, such as crowns or bonding.

According to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), nail biting causes a lot of damage to the front teeth because these teeth are not meant to be in constant chewing mode. By nature, the front teeth are thinner than the molars, which are better made to withstand the impact from chewing. Other potential damage resulting from nail biting includes injury to the gums and

mouth tissue from sharp nail edges, as well as the spread of bacteria from dirty fingernails.

Onychophagia (the scientific term for nail biting) doesn't just mean biting the nail tips. It also includes biting the cuticle and the soft tissue surrounding the nail.

This bad habit is common in all age groups, but is seen more often in children and teenagers. According to a 2003 article in *Rudolph's Pediatrics*, 50 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 18 bite their nails at one time or another, while 23 percent of young adults ages 18 to 22 are nail biters. Most people stop biting their nails by the age of 30, says the author. Interestingly enough, though, boys are more likely than girls to bite their nails after the age of 10, which may help to explain the 10 percent of men over the age of 30 who continue to bite their nails.

Damage to the tooth surface and cuts on the gums aren't the only dangers posed by nail biting. Those nail biters who wear braces also run the risk of causing damage to their

teeth roots. Teeth with braces already endure increased pressure from the braces, according to the AGD, and the added pressure from nail biting can increase the risk of root resorption, also known as "shortening." This condition can lead to tooth loss, which can result in the need for implants, crowns, or bridges.

Root resorption takes a long time to develop, says the AGD, so just because you bite your nails, it doesn't mean you're going to lose or damage your teeth. But it's better to be aware of the fact that your teeth are not as tough as nails and that you should nip this bad habit in the bud, so to speak. 

For more information on your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit our Web site at www.massdental.org.