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“Winterizing” Your Teeth: Keeping Injury and Sensitivity at Bay

As the winter season quickly approaches, many worry about the state of their cars and their homes. Will my car make it through another winter? What can I do to “winterize” my home to operate efficiently and at its best? But the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) believes the same goes for one’s teeth—preventing sensitivity and injury can lead to a happier holiday season.

Nighttime teeth grinding or clenching, tooth whitening treatments, and even recent fillings can all cause tooth sensitivity. Sensitive teeth can also result from an uneven bite, cavities, and exposed roots. This sensitivity, such as a sharp, sudden pain or a dull ache, can be triggered by extreme hot or cold temperatures and sometimes when eating sweet foods such as candy. Even breathing in frigid winter air or sipping a cup of hot coffee can sometimes set off discomfort.

Slipping and falling on icy sidewalks, driveways, or while ice skating or skiing can lead to oral injuries, such as bruised lips or cracked teeth. Crunching ice cubes and hard candies can also cause teeth to form cracks, and a cracked tooth can be extremely sensitive and painful.

There are steps you can take, however, to make sure your teeth are protected, including seeing your dentist regularly for cleanings and to address any issues.

“Sensitivity-reducing toothpaste is helpful,” says Gerald Kugel, DMD, a member of the MDS and a professor at the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. “It also helps to wear a nightguard while sleeping to help with any pain or sensitivity associated with tooth grinding, and wear a mouthguard during sports to prevent injury.”

Tooth whitening is an area where many people experience sensitivity, especially with at-home whitening kits and products. “About 50 percent of people who whiten their teeth will have some sensitivity,” notes Dr. Kugel. “One can avoid some of this by using sensitivity-reducing toothpaste before and after whitening, and also be sure not to over-whiten the teeth and to follow the directions.”

Seeing your dentist regularly and being cautious on icy surfaces can help to “winterize” your teeth and lead to a happier, healthier smile.

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The Massachusetts Dental Society is a 5,000-member professional association and statewide constituent of the American Dental Association.