



Have you ever taken a sip of an ice-cold drink on a hot summer day or a spoonful of steaming soup on a cold winter afternoon only to be met with a sharp jab in your tooth? When you floss or brush your teeth, do you wince in pain? You may shrug it off as a minor annoyance, but the truth is that there's nothing minor about sensitive teeth, because ignoring the condition could lead to major mouth problems down the road. When it comes to your oral health, you can't be overly "sensitive."

Dentin can also be exposed when gums recede, leading to sensitivity near the gum line. The best way to prevent gums from receding and causing hypersensitivity is maintaining good oral hygiene. Flossing regularly and brushing correctly can help keep your gums healthy and prevent them from receding. And when it comes to brushing, be sure to use a soft-bristle brush and a gentle hand, as medium-bristle brushes and brushing too vigorously can injure gums and expose tooth roots.

SENSITIVE TEETH: Wince Not, Want Not

While it's easy to shrug off tooth sensitivity as just the result of eating something too hot or too cold, sensitive teeth may actually be the symptom of an underlying problem: cavities, a cracked tooth, worn tooth enamel, worn fillings, or exposed tooth roots. If a cavity, filling, or cracked tooth is the culprit, your dentist can offer a fix by filling the cavity, replacing the filling, or fixing the fractured tooth. However, if he or she determines that cavities and fractured teeth are not behind this hypersensitivity, then the cause could be either worn tooth enamel or an exposed tooth root.

Healthy teeth are made of enamel, cementum, dentin, and pulp. Enamel, the outermost layer of the tooth, is the strongest substance in the body and it is what you see when you smile. Cementum is what covers the root. Dentin can be found under the enamel and the cementum, and it, in turn, surrounds the pulp. The pulp contains the nerves and vasculature of the tooth.

When the dentin loses its protective covering, hot and cold foods and beverages—as well as acidic or sticky foods—stimulate the nerves and cells inside the tooth, leading to hypersensitivity and discomfort.

If you're experiencing tooth sensitivity, you may want to try a desensitizing toothpaste to alleviate your discomfort. These special toothpastes—many of which can be purchased over-the-counter at your local drugstore or supermarket—contain compounds that help block transmission of sensation from the tooth surface to the nerve. Be aware that it may take several applications before tooth sensitivity is reduced. And if desensitizing toothpaste does not give you

some relief, your dentist may be able to provide in-office techniques, such as applying a fluoride gel that strengthens the tooth enamel and reduces the transmission of sensation.

Regardless of the severity of your sensitivity and discomfort, and even if desensitizing toothpastes temporarily alleviate the pain, you'll want to be sure to visit your dentist, who can determine the cause of the sensitivity. Not only will this help you head off any conditions (e.g., exposed roots that, if left untreated, could eventually require serious treatment, such as a root canal), but also it will allow you to enjoy that cold drink or hot soup without wincing.

