

Q: My dentist tells me I grind my teeth at night. How does he know? If he's right, I'd like to stop. What causes it and is there anything I can do to stop on my own?

A: Good questions. If you wake up with no awareness of grinding your teeth, such as sore muscles, joints or teeth, you must rely on the hard evidence, pardon the pun. Your dentist is likely noticing a loss of enamel, micro-chipping or vertical cracks in your teeth. We can't re-grow tooth structure so if we want teeth to last a lifetime it is important to address the problem.

Tooth grinding, otherwise known as "bruxism" has a few possible causes. Most bruxism takes place during night time REM (rapid eye movement) sleep—a time where you are not conscious and thus have no choice in the matter. The most prevalent diagnosis is called "interference bruxism" and results from slight interferences in the way the teeth fit together. Your jaw joint closure has an arcing path that is usually different than your habitual bite. If any of your teeth get in the way of that smooth closure it causes a slight irritation—enough to get your muscles busy, working on smoothing it out. Unfortunately, that stimulus can cause "parafunctional" bruxing patterns (outside the limits of a normal chewing position) such as grinding front teeth in an off-center pattern.

The remedy for interference bruxism is a careful bite balancing procedure, completed in harmony with the correct orthopedic seated position of healthy jaw joints. Another remedy is a bitesplint (also called a bite plane, night guard or MAGO) for night wear. It is a hard plastic precision-made appliance that, in order to eliminate bruxism, **MUST** be made in harmony with the proper orthopedic seated position of the jaw joints.

A small percentage of night time bruxing habits occur during a delta stage sleep. The diagnosis is CNS bruxism. This habit is more aggressive and more difficult to remedy. A bitesplint is definitely recommended. Often CNS bruxers have some OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) symptoms as well. Bruxism is influenced by several medications, especially psychotropic meds such as antidepressants. And what about stress? Stress can definitely increase bruxism.