



Guide to teeth grinding

- ◆ What causes teeth grinding?
- ◆ What problems can teeth grinding cause?
- ◆ How can teeth grinding be treated?

What causes teeth grinding?

Teeth grinding or clenching (**bruxism**) can happen during the daytime as a habit in response to stress and anxiety, or during deep concentration; it is often done without the person being aware of it. It can also happen during sleep (**nocturnal/sleep bruxism**). Children may grind their teeth when their first or second set of teeth emerges, or in response to earache.

The exact cause of teeth grinding in adults is unknown. Teeth grinding may be linked to experiencing stressful or frustrating situations; excessive intake of alcohol or tea/coffee; smoking; taking drugs for sleep, depression, or anxiety; taking illegal drugs; having missing or misaligned teeth; having upper and lower teeth that meet abnormally (**malocclusion**); and certain medical conditions. See your dentist if you notice any of the signs of teeth grinding/clenching shown in the **Box**.

What problems can teeth grinding cause?

Most cases of teeth grinding are mild and do not show symptoms. However, problems include the following:

- Crowns of teeth become worn down and require restoration, or previous restorations become damaged and need replacement, so as to allow proper chewing
- Cracks in teeth allow microbes to infect the tissues inside the teeth, which may require fillings or root canal treatment
- Worn-down or cracked tooth surfaces lead to tooth sensitivity
- Sleep disruption for the patient and bedroom partner
- Muscle aches, headaches
- Stiffness or pain in the jaw joints (**temporomandibular joint disorder**)

How can teeth grinding be treated?

There is no cure for teeth grinding. Because people may be unaware they have this condition, **regular visits to a dentist are important**.

The dentist will notice signs of teeth grinding or its complications; will perform a full examination and ask questions to identify associated lifestyle or medical factors; and may recommend professional help, such as from a medical doctor, sleep specialist, behaviour specialist, or stress counsellor. The dentist may also treat conditions such as inflammation; broken, cracked, missing, or infected teeth; and jaw disorders. Other steps include the following:

- The dentist may custom-make a soft-plastic **mouth guard** or hard-plastic **mouth splint** to protect teeth, especially at night
- The dentist may correct misaligned teeth by tooth-straightening (**orthodontic**) treatment
- **Reducing intake** of alcohol and tea/coffee, especially at night
- Finding ways of **relaxing and managing/preventing stress**
- **Giving up smoking**; Hong Kong Department of Health Smoking Cessation Hotline: 1833 183; HKU Smoking Reduction Hotline: 2819 2697; HKU Female Smoking Cessation Hotline: 2819 2692; Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health website: <http://smokefree.hk> (Chinese) or <http://smokefree.hk/en/home> (English)

Sources: Mayo Clinic, USA, <www.mayoclinic.com>; National Health Service, UK, <www.nhs.uk>

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Signs and symptoms of teeth grinding/clenching

- Worn-down, chipped, or cracked teeth
- Damaged tooth restorations
- Sensitive teeth or toothache when you bite down
- Injury to or pain in gums, tongue, or inner cheeks
- Headache or earache
- Ache in jaw, face, or shoulders
- Clicking sound from jaws when opening and closing mouth
- Interrupted sleep
- Complaints from bedroom partner, about teeth-grinding sounds
- You or others notice that you often clench your teeth