



ARE YOU GNASHING?

Do you grind your teeth? It's a common habit, but it can also cause pain and problems – or be an indication that something else isn't quite right

Have you ever been told you grind your teeth in your sleep? Maybe a friend has noticed it at a sleepover, or you've woken with an aching jaw. Or perhaps you've caught yourself clenching your jaw and gritting your teeth during exams or stressful conversations. When it comes to teeth grinding, sometimes the person doing it can be the last to know. It's surprisingly common – especially in young people – and sometimes nothing to worry about, but it can also be an indication of deeper issues such as problems with your airway, teeth alignment, stress or anxiety.

What is bruxism?

The medical term for grinding your teeth is bruxism, and the NHS says it's common in children and teenagers, especially when you are asleep. Lucy Stock is principal dentist at Gentle Dental Care in Belfast, and says that between 15–40% of children will grind their teeth in their sleep at some point. 'It can be very loud,' she says. Lucy also estimates that around 20–30% of young people grind their teeth while awake. Perhaps you've felt yourself clenching your teeth together during certain situations,

although she adds: 'You can be totally unaware you're doing it – even if you're awake.' You can also notice when another person is doing it because you can see their lower jaw tense and bulge. 'You see it a lot on TV and in movies, because actors are told to do it to show anger or frustration,' says Lucy.

What causes it?

The NHS states that the most common cause of teeth grinding is stress and anxiety. However it can be caused by problems with your airway, such as sinus or throat issues, and may also involve snoring and sleep apnoea. Certain medications, including anti-depressants, can cause bruxism, as can facial injuries that affect the alignment of your top and bottom teeth – what dentists refer to as your 'bite'.

'We sometimes see it as a result of a jaw injury caused by something like banging your chin on the bottom of a swimming pool or taking a knock playing rugby,' says Lucy. Teeth grinding can also be caused by too much caffeine – Lucy cautions against drinking too many energy drinks.



How do you know?

If you are grinding your teeth during sleep, you may not realise you're doing it unless a parent, sibling or friend hears you. Or perhaps you've heard a friend doing it? Lucy says: 'You might wake up with a heavy feeling in your facial muscles, a clicky jaw or feeling fatigued.'

In the long term, teeth grinding can cause other health problems, such as headaches and migraines, tinnitus, neck and shoulder pain, and even problems with your sight, so it's important to be aware of it.

When to worry?

The NHS says that many young people naturally grow out of grinding their teeth, meaning it's a habit that may simply stop as you get older. However, it's important to understand what's causing it, and Lucy says if you're worried then it's best to make an appointment to discuss it with your dentist or GP. They can help you rule out any physical underlying causes or review any medications you're taking.

'I'd definitely recommend getting checked out, because it can affect the way your face and jaw develop as you grow,' says Lucy. 'Your dentist may refer you to an Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist to check your airway, or an orthodontist to look at the position of your teeth and your bite.' You may be given a custom-made mouthguard to wear to bring your jaw into a more neutral position. Lucy adds: 'Don't buy an over-the-counter generic mouthguard because these can damage your bite.'



Helping yourself

If you think your teeth grinding is being caused by stress or anxiety, there are lots of ways you can help yourself. Lucy says she often takes a holistic approach with her patients, asking whether they might be stressed at school, or if something at home is making them anxious.

'There's so much you can do to lower your stress levels,' she explains. 'Cut out processed foods and sugar, avoid high-caffeine energy drinks and reduce your screen time. I often talk to patients about going for a simple walk in nature.' Dancing and listening to music can also be a great way to relax and ease tension.

If you are grinding your teeth during your sleep, Lucy recommends calming breathing exercises at bedtime. Or if you're facing a stressful day, you could try a positive morning affirmation. 'I think about it in terms of piling your brain with good energy and positive thoughts,' she says.

With a little knowledge and understanding, teeth grinding can be understood and solved. 'Bruxism is common,' says Lucy, 'and there are lots of things you can do about it.'



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