

BRUXISM, CLENCHING, AND TMJ PROBLEMS BY NORMAN J. POMERANCE, D.D.S.

If you wake up in the morning with your jaws aching, you may be grinding your teeth all night. This grinding or “gnashing” of your teeth is called bruxing. Bruxism can occur any time during the day or night. Clenching, which involves closing the teeth tightly and squeezing the muscles of mastication repeatedly without moving the teeth themselves can also occur at any time. These habits can cause various symptoms of TMJ Disorder and can also damage the teeth.

Symptoms of TMJ Disorder can include popping and/or clicking with or without pain in the jaws or muscles of mastication; cold or pressure sensitivity of teeth; pain radiating to the ear, down the neck, or to the temple region and limitation of opening. In addition, these habits can lead to headaches and fractures of the teeth or prematurely worn teeth which can become a cosmetic problem.

There can be many causes of these habits both dental and nondental. Stress and anxiety often lead to many of the mentioned symptoms. Besides attempting to alleviate the stress, an evaluation of the dentition and when necessary the construction of a custom made mouth or occlusal guard is recommended to relieve the problems.

An occlusal guard is a horseshoe shaped clear plastic appliance with a flat and smooth surface which is usually worn over the upper teeth whenever the habit of clenching or bruxing is diagnosed. It can be worn during the day, but usually at night. The mouth guard protects the teeth from bruxing allowing the acrylic to wear instead of the dentition. Since the biting of the guard is smooth, there are no “trigger” points to set off a bruxing episode and hopefully it will decrease the severity of the bruxing. Also, the thickness of the mouth guard helps prevent the soreness of the muscles by preventing complete closure of the mouth, protecting the muscles from repeated closure and overuse.

Of course, a thorough examination is needed by your dentist, including radiographs to rule out tooth related pain or sinus problems before a diagnosis of TMJ Disorder can be made.