

Oral Health Tips

Sensitive Teeth: May Be a Warning of More Serious Problems

Do you have sensitive teeth? If you have a common problem called “sensitive teeth,” a sip of iced tea or a cup of hot cocoa, the sudden intake of cold air or pressure from your toothbrush may be painful. Sensitive teeth can be experienced at any age as a momentary slight twinge to long-term severe discomfort. It is important to consult your dentist because sensitive teeth may be an early warning sign of more serious dental problems.

Tooth Structure

To better understand how sensitivity develops, we need to consider the composition of tooth structure. The crown — the part of the tooth that is most visible — has a tough, protective jacket of enamel, which is an extremely strong substance. Below the gum line, a layer of cementum protects the tooth root. Underneath the enamel and cementum is dentin.

Dentin is a part of the tooth that contains tiny tubes. When dentin loses its protective covering and is exposed, these small tubes permit heat, cold, certain types of foods or pressure to stimulate nerves and cells inside of the tooth. This causes teeth to be sensitive and to produce occasional discomfort. In addition, when enamel or cementum are decayed or cracked, dentin can be exposed, causing discomfort.

Causes

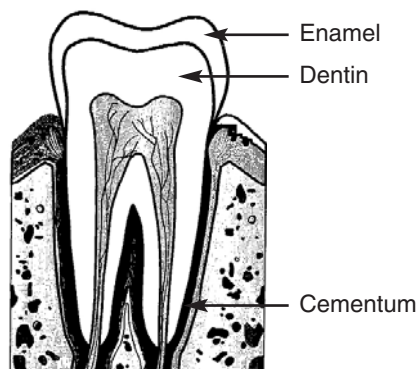
There can be many causes for sensitive teeth. Cavities, fractured teeth, worn tooth enamel, cracked teeth, exposed tooth root, gum recession or periodontal disease may be causing the problem.

Periodontal disease is an infection of the gums and bone that support the teeth. If left untreated, it can progress until bone and other supporting tissues are destroyed. This can leave the root surfaces of teeth exposed and may lead to tooth sensitivity.

Brushing incorrectly or too aggressively may injure your gums and can also cause tooth roots to be exposed. Grinding your teeth can wear down tooth enamel. Some abrasive toothpastes, whitening toothpastes and tartar control toothpastes may increase tooth sensitivity. Dental erosion (the loss of tooth enamel caused by attacks of acid from acidic foods and drinks) may also lead to sensitivity. Likewise, people suffering from bulimia or gastroesophageal reflux disease may also have sensitive teeth as a result of frequent contact between the teeth and stomach acid.

Practicing good oral hygiene is important to preventing tooth decay, periodontal disease and the pain associated with sensitive teeth.

[continued on next page](#)



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[continued from previous page](#)

Tips to Minimize Tooth Sensitivity

1. Practicing good oral hygiene is an important first step. Use the correct brushing technique with a soft-bristled toothbrush and use dental floss to keep your teeth and gums clean and healthy.
2. Obtaining regular dental care is essential, including the restoration of teeth that may be decayed or damaged.
3. Using fluoridated dental products can keep your teeth strong and reduce the likelihood that they will become vulnerable. In some cases, fluoride will act to remineralize teeth, rebuilding lost structure.
4. Decreasing the frequency of the consumption of acidic foods and drinks can be helpful for individuals with dental erosion.
5. See your dentist if you suffer from bulimia or gastroesophageal reflux disease to obtain advice to prevent damage to your teeth.

Do I Need to See My Dentist?

Most importantly, if you have sensitive teeth, consult your dentist to get a diagnostic evaluation. This will determine the extent of the problem and the treatment, behaviors and products that will best serve you. Dentists can provide mouth guards to minimize the impact of tooth grinding. They can restore damaged teeth, provide other advice (such as using de-sensitizing toothpaste) and recommend other techniques to eliminate or minimize the pain of sensitive teeth.

Sources: Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org; American Dental Association: www.ada.org