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Sense

Sensitivity



Tooth sensitivity is a pain and your dentist needs to know about it

By Julia Aitken

Tooth Sensitivity 101

Your dentist needs to know if your teeth are sensitive because the causes can include:

- tooth decay or damage
- gum disease and recession
- tooth grinding

Think having sensitive teeth is just an inconvenience? Think again. When ice cream or frosty drinks come with an “ouch” factor, it’s time to tell your dentist. “Tooth sensitivity may be an initial marker for something more serious,” explains Dr. Harry Höediono, Past President of the Ontario Dental Association and a dentist in Kitchener, Ont.

Tooth sensitivity occurs when the protective enamel on the tooth is damaged or when receding gums or periodontal disease exposes the dentin at the roots. Explains Dr. Höediono: “Dentin is the material that makes up the part of the tooth below the gums, the tooth root, and is found under the tooth’s enamel layer. It is a much softer material



than enamel and contains tubules, tiny tubes that connect to the tooth's pulp or nerve chamber. When this material is exposed to the air, cold, acidic drinks or infected with decay, the tooth may exhibit signs of discomfort."

Once you've spoken with your dentist and the major causes have been treated and/or eliminated (see "Tooth Sensitivity 101"), there are several ways to relieve the discomfort.

Brushing regularly with a desensitizing toothpaste helps because it contains ingredients such as potassium nitrate that seal the tubules in the dentin, says Dr. Gillian Soskin, a dentist at London Health Sciences Centre in London, Ont. "It's like putting a sweater on the tooth and insulating it," she explains.

(Please visit the Canadian Dental Association's website — www.cda-adc.ca — and look on the CDA Seal of Recognition page for a list of recommended desensitizing products.)

Using a fluoride rinse or gel may help to harden the enamel, protecting the teeth. Depending on their strength, these rinses or gels are available with or without a prescription. Talk to your dentist about whether this option is suitable for you — and how frequently it should be used.

Another option available that your dentist may recommend is a fluoride varnish, a thick paste with a high concentration of fluoride that's applied to sensitive teeth every two or three months.

Bonding is a more permanent fix where an insulating layer of tooth-coloured composite resin is applied to exposed, sensitive roots. According to Dr. Höediono, this can provide long-lasting protection from tooth sensitivity provided you use a soft toothbrush, warm water and gentle brushing.

If grinding your teeth at night has caused tooth enamel to wear away, your dentist might suggest making you a close-fitting, thermoplastic nightguard to protect your teeth while you sleep. ■

Fighting the "Ouch" Factor

Here's how to help prevent tooth sensitivity:

Keep your teeth clean: plaque forms bacteria that irritates your gums and may make them recede.

Use a desensitizing toothpaste and fluoridated dental products.

Use a soft toothbrush that won't scratch tooth enamel or wear away gum tissue and brush gently using a circular motion.

Use warm water when brushing your teeth to soften your toothbrush's bristles.

Avoid tobacco in any form. In addition to its carcinogenic effects, smoking cigarettes or chewing tobacco may cause gums to recede.

Reduce your intake of acidic foods and sugary snacks and drinks.

Dental 911

You should always tell your dentist if your teeth are sensitive to hot, cold or sweet, but Dr. Höediono says you should call your dentist at once if you experience any of these symptoms:

- **Your teeth are also sensitive to pressure.**
- **Your tooth sensitivity doesn't decrease after using a desensitizing toothpaste for a few weeks.**
- **The pain from tooth sensitivity lasts longer than one hour.**
- **The gums around your sensitive teeth appear to be changing colour.**

