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Relief for Sensitive Teeth



If savoring a spoonful of ice cream or sipping hot tea triggers brief, sharp pain, you could be suffering from tooth sensitivity. The common condition that affects up to 35% of adults, occurs when gums have receded or tooth enamel is worn down, leaving the softer underlying layer of your teeth – the dentin – exposed. Dentin connects with tooth nerves, and when it's unprotected, the nerves can become irritated in response to cold, hot, sweet or sour food and drinks, pressure, or cold air. Sensitivity can also signal a cavity, broken filling, or cracked tooth. See a dentist if the pain is throbbing or prolonged. Otherwise, you can usually control sensitivity by addressing its causes and following the tips below.

Acid Erosion. When tooth enamel is exposed to acid – from beverages, food, medication, or stomach acid – it temporarily loses minerals, causing it to soften. If the enamel is repeatedly exposed, it can gradually wear away. Acid is found in many frequently consumed items, including most fruit and fruit juices, sports drinks, diet and regular sodas, wine, and vinegar. To protect your teeth: Limit acidic food – such as berries, citrus fruits, ketchup, and others – and drinks to main meals to prevent continual exposure. Swallow acidic drinks quickly or use a straw aimed at the back of your mouth. Neutralize acids by following them with

milk, cheese, or water. Consume acidic beverages with nonacidic food – for instance, orange juice with toast and eggs – or try a less corrosive calcium enriched juice. Avoid acidic drinks at bedtime and while exercising, when you produce less saliva. If you chew aspirin or vitamin C pills, rinse your mouth with water afterward, or ask your doctor for a form that won't come in contact with your teeth.

Overzealous oral hygiene. If the bristles in your toothbrush are spread out, you're probably brushing too hard, a habit that can cause gums to recede and enamel to wear down. Brushing right after an acidic meal or drink can accelerate damage because the softened enamel is more vulnerable. Doing that, you have allowed the beverage to get the best of the tooth. Abrasive toothpaste, acidic mouthwash, and teeth-whiteners can also contribute to sensitivity. Use a soft bristle toothbrush and gentle touch, holding it with your fingertips rather than in the palm of your hand. Switch to a less abrasive paste made for sensitive teeth, which typically contains potassium nitrate to block pain. Use it regularly for at least two weeks with a minimal amount of water to avoid diluting the active ingredients. You can also use a finger to apply a thin layer of the paste to sensitive spot after brushing. Avoid bleaching your teeth, which temporarily causes and exacerbates sensitivity.

Dry mouth. Saliva is the best defense against acid erosion because it clears, dilutes, and neutralizes acids, restores minerals, and forms a protective film over enamel. Dry mouth is a common problem and a side effect of 400 drugs. Increase the flow of saliva by using sugar-free lozenges; avoid those containing citric or malic acid, or labeled "sour" or "tart". Chewing sugarless gum can be abrasive to softened enamel. Avoid alcoholic or caffeinated beverages which dry the mouth. Avoid acidic food if you don't produce much saliva and have severe erosion.

Teeth Grinding. This habit, which can occur due to stress, abnormal bite, sleep disorders, or temporomandibular joint disorder (TMI), can wear away enamel. Try relaxation techniques, avoid triggers like caffeine, which can heighten muscle tension, and alcohol, which has been linked to increased risk of teeth grinding. Ask your dentist about getting a mouth guard. If you don't notice an improvement in a few weeks of trying these tips, ask your dentist about applying a fluoride varnish, which forms a barrier over teeth, or other treatment.

This article is from Medical Matters, Consumer Reports on Health, September 2011. Quotes taken from Kenneth Markowitz D.D.S., assistant professor of oral biology@ University of Medicine and Dentistry in New Jersey, and David Albert, D.D.S., associate professor of clinical dentistry at Columbia University College of Dental Medicine in New York City.

Happy brushing and flossing. Your Parish Nurse.

To contact Holy Family Parish Nurse Ministry call 330-688-6412 ext. 462 or view at www.holyfamilystow.org.