

Readers' clinic: worn enamel

Dr Eddie Scher, a specialist in oral surgery and prosthodontics, advises a reader on how to prevent further wear on his teeth.



To prevent overzealous brushing, use an electric toothbrush Photo: ALAMY

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Dear Readers' Clinic

I recently went to my dentist for a check-up after I thought I noticed my gums were receding. One area had become noticeably sensitive, especially when drinking liquids. However, on inspection, my dentist explained that in fact the enamel on the tooth had worn down – a combination of furious brushing (I do like a firm-headed brush) and grinding my teeth during my sleep. While she said using an enamel-enhancing toothpaste might help, she said I ought to be fitted with a night brace to prevent me from further grinding and chipping away the enamel. Rather than pay £500 for a brace, which I know I won't wear, is there any anything else I can do to reduce the sensitivity and rebuild the missing enamel?

Mr CW, Chesterfield

Dear Mr CW,

In my opinion, the wear on your teeth is of more immediate concern than the sensitivity it appears to be causing you. The manual erosion of the enamel, the hard surface on the exterior of the tooth, can be caused by brushing too hard as much as by exposure to the acid in fizzy drinks, fruit and alcohol. Wearing the enamel down in your sleep, to the extent that the sensitive layer of dentine beneath is exposed, could in time lead to a number of even more serious conditions.

If your teeth are showing signs of wear due to nocturnal grinding, a surprisingly common condition also known as bruxism, then you may go on to develop what dentists call dysfunction – pain in your upper and lower jaws due to the muscles becoming fatigued as you grind your teeth at night. You may also experience clicking or pain – or both – in the temporo-mandibular joints (TMJ), or jaw joints, because they may also have become worn.

There is a difference of opinion as to the cause of TMJ Dysfunction; some dentists say it's because of the way your jaws bite together on your teeth, others will say the joints are problematic, while others will tell you that stress is the overriding contributing factor. The answer is it could be any of the above or a combination of factors.

The good news is that although dentists differ as to the cause of the dysfunction, most agree that the first line of treatment is the non-invasive route. That is exactly what your dentist recommended when she suggested you wear a night guard. I believe that a brace made of moulded plastic that fits comfortably over your teeth will help. I understand your reluctance in wearing a night guard, but most patients have no problem getting used to them; any discomfort experienced is usually short term. Patients say it is of remarkable benefit as it relaxes their muscles and gives them a good night's sleep. Partners may also reap the benefits of a grind-free and maybe even a snore-free night.

Regarding the sensitivity you are experiencing, reducing the pressure used when brushing will help reduce wear on the teeth and any recession at the gum margin. To prevent overzealous brushing, use an electric toothbrush with an alarm that warns against excessive pressure. Combining this with a sensitivity-control toothpaste could help considerably. For more severe sensitivity, your dentist or hygienist can recommend stronger products.

As for restoring your worn tooth enamel, my advice would be deal with the cause of the wear before addressing any aesthetic concerns. Once you are comfortable and no longer experiencing dysfunction symptoms, the restorations available to you range from white fillings to veneers and crowns.

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