

BRUXISM & CLENCHING

Here's what you can do to try to stop bruxing and to cope with discomfort.

Wear a night guard. Your dentist can make a plastic or acrylic appliance for you to wear at night. Although it may not stop you from grinding, it will redistribute the forces from grinding and protect your teeth from damage. Your dentist will want to see you regularly to check for any tooth movement or cavities that might result from wearing such an appliance. Keep in mind, however, that in order for the night guard to do any good, you must remember to put it in.

Keep your lips sealed, but your teeth apart. Your teeth should be touching only when you're chewing or swallowing. Drop your jaw and feel the muscles relax -- then try to maintain that feeling.

Take a warm bath before bedtime. The warmth of the water may temporarily relax your jaw muscles.

Exercise. Your body, not your jaw, that is. A walk or other mild exercise may help relieve some of the tension and stress that's causing bruxism.

Remind yourself. If you're a daytime clencher, think of ways to remind yourself not to clench. For example, you can put a red dot on your phone, stickers on your wristwatch, or even a string on your finger to remind you to keep your jaw relaxed.

Relieve stress. Stress is a major contributor to grinding, so if you can reduce stress, you will likely reduce grinding.

Learn coping skills. See a psychologist or psychiatrist. Take an assertiveness training course. Practice techniques such as progressive relaxation or guided imagery or self hypnosis. Listen to relaxation tapes. In other words, find something that helps you to better handle the stress in your life.

Take a mild analgesic. Ibuprofen, for example, can dull the pain and help relax stiff muscles. For a list of precautions to take when using over-the-counter analgesics see your pharmacist.

Apply heat. Warm, moist heat is best. The simplest method: Soak a washcloth in hot water, wring it out, and hold it up to your jaw. You can use a heating pad, although moist heat will penetrate better.

Massage. It works for the rest of your body, so try a gentle massage to your jaw muscles.

Give your jaw muscles a break. Limit steak, hard-crust bread, popcorn, gum, and other chewy foods that give your jaw a workout, especially when jaw discomfort is at its worst.

Train yourself not to clench or grind your teeth. If you notice that you clench or grind during the day, position the tip of your tongue between your teeth. This practice trains your jaw muscles to relax.

Avoid or cut back on foods and drinks that contain caffeine, such as colas, chocolate, and coffee.

Avoid alcohol. Grinding tends to intensify after alcohol consumption.

These tips should help you ease your jaw pain and get your bruxism under control and reduce your pain.