

From the office of:

Nahidh D. Andrews, DMD

3332 Portage Ave

South Bend, IN 46628-3656

(574) 273-3900



Are Your Teeth a Sensitive Subject?

A patient's guide to sensitive teeth
and better oral care



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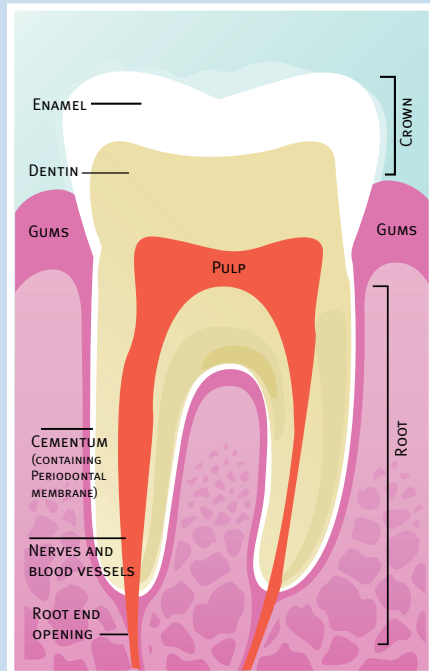
ARE YOUR TEETH A SENSITIVE SUBJECT?

If you experience sensitivity in your mouth, you may be among the 40 million people in the United States affected by dentin hypersensitivity. Dentin hypersensitivity, or sensitive teeth, is a common oral condition that is characterized by discomfort or sharp and sudden pain in one or more teeth. This reaction is often triggered by hot, cold, sweet, or sour foods and drinks; pressure on the tooth; or even breathing cold air. Sensitive teeth can be very painful and aggravating and can even affect one's ability to enjoy certain foods, such as ice cream or soup.

WHY DOES DENTIN HYPERSENSITIVITY HAPPEN?

In order to understand why teeth become sensitive, you must first know how they are structured. Each tooth is covered by a protective coating of enamel, the hardest and strongest substance in your body. Below the enamel is another protective layer called cementum, which shields the tooth root under the gum line. Underneath both the enamel and cementum is a less dense tissue called dentin that is comprised of tiny tubes that connect to the tooth's inner nerve center.

When the enamel and cementum wear or decay, the tubes within the dentin are left unprotected, ultimately leaving the nerve center vulnerable to sensations, including pain. The nerves inside your teeth are particularly irritated by hot and cold temperatures, acidity, and sugar.



CAUSES OF DENTIN HYPERSENSITIVITY

Now that you know what's going on inside of your teeth, let's take a look at the external factors that may be contributing to dentin hypersensitivity.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SENSITIVE TEETH:

AGGRESSIVE BRUSHING

Brushing too hard can cause the enamel to wear on your teeth, leaving the dentin exposed. Aggressive brushing can also cause gums to recede.

ACIDIC FOODS AND BEVERAGES

Acidic foods and beverages like grapefruit, pickles, tea, soda, and citrus juices are often linked to sensitive teeth. Even things like sports drinks can damage your teeth.

CERTAIN TOOTHPASTES AND MOUTHWASHES

Believe it or not, some over-the-counter toothpastes and mouthwashes contain ingredients that can worsen tooth sensitivity. An example of this is sodium pyrophosphate, a key ingredient in tartar-control toothpastes.

TOOTH WHITENING PRODUCTS

Yes, even tooth whitening products can lead to dentin hypersensitivity. The baking soda and peroxide in these products can be major contributors to sensitive teeth.

GUM DISEASE

Gum disease, also known as gingivitis, can also lead to sensitive teeth. When gums are sore and inflamed, the roots of your teeth may be left more vulnerable.

BROKEN OR CRACKED TEETH

When teeth are broken or chipped, certain parts of the tooth may no longer be protected by enamel. Clenching or grinding your teeth may also wear down enamel, leaving the dentin exposed and vulnerable.

BULIMIA AND ACID REFLUX

Acidity in the mouth due to bulimia and acid reflux can cause teeth to erode, which can increase sensitivity.

PLAQUE

Plaque build-up is also linked with dentin hypersensitivity.

ROUTINE DENTAL PROCEDURES

Certain dental procedures—such as teeth cleaning, crown placement, and tooth restoration—can cause temporary sensitivity. However, this should subside in a couple of weeks.

THE LINK BETWEEN SENSITIVITY AND TOOTH EROSION

You may have noticed that many of the causes of dentin hypersensitivity are directly related to tooth erosion. Things like brushing too hard, drinking sports drinks, and having acid reflux can all wear down the enamel, causing your teeth to erode. That's why early detection is so important. The sooner a patient can recognize the signs of tooth erosion, the more likely it is that he or she will prevent other oral health conditions, such as dentin hypersensitivity.

SIGNS OF TOOTH EROSION

- **DISCOLORATION**
Teeth may become slightly yellow in color as they begin to erode.
- **TRANSPARENCY**
Front teeth may appear transparent on the biting edge.
- **CRACKS**
Small cracks or roughness may appear along the edges of your teeth.
- **ROUNDED TEETH**
Your teeth may have a rounded or “sand-blasted” look.
- **CUPPING OF THE TEETH**
The chewing surface of your teeth may reveal small dents.



WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE SENSITIVITY?

Oftentimes, patients will try to manage tooth sensitivity by staying away from certain hot or cold beverages, or even avoiding the sensitive area of the mouth while brushing. And while these methods may seem like the quickest and easiest ways to prevent sensitivity, none of them will actually solve the problem.

The good news is that there are many things a patient can do at home to reduce tooth sensitivity—and none of them involve taking away ice cream!

TIPS FOR REDUCING TOOTH SENSITIVITY: SWITCH TO A DESENSITIZING TOOTHPASTE

There are many brands of toothpaste available that are specifically made for sensitive teeth. These can be found at your local pharmacy. With regular use, you will notice a decrease in sensitivity after a couple of weeks.

USE A SOFT-BRISTLED TOOTHBRUSH

When you use a hard- or medium-bristled toothbrush, you may be wearing away the enamel on your teeth or causing your gums to recede. Soft-bristled toothbrushes are much gentler on your teeth and gums.

PRACTICE GOOD ORAL HYGIENE

Practicing good oral hygiene is very important when it comes to protecting your teeth. Floss regularly and brush your teeth at least twice a day—especially after meals!

AVOID HIGHLY ACIDIC FOODS AND BEVERAGES

Make a conscious effort to limit your intake of highly acidic foods and beverages. Acidity can gradually dissolve tooth enamel, leaving the dentin exposed.

TALK TO YOUR DENTIST

If you experience dentin hypersensitivity, talk to your dentist. He or she may be able to treat sensitivity by applying protective sealants, desensitizing agents, topical fluoride, fillings, or crowns. If sensitivity has occurred due to receding gums, your dentist may recommend a surgical gum graft to cover and protect the tooth root.

PROPER BRUSHING TECHNIQUE

As simple as it sounds, many patients do not know the best way to brush their teeth. Even people who brush several times a day may be doing their teeth more harm than good—especially if they are brushing too hard! Aggressive tooth brushing can wear down the enamel and gum line over time, sometimes causing irreversible damage.

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO PROPER TOOTH BRUSHING



STEP 1

Apply a pea-sized amount of toothpaste onto the bristles of your toothbrush. In general, soft-bristled brushes are recommended over medium- or hard-bristled ones.

STEP 2

Place the toothbrush beside your teeth at a 45 degree angle and begin brushing in a circular motion; use short and gentle strokes.



STEP 3

Continue this pattern on the outside of your teeth, inside of your teeth, the chewing surfaces of your teeth, and between teeth. Pay careful attention to your gum line. Using a back-and-forth motion can cause the gum surface to recede, making the root surface tender.



STEP 4

Gently brush your tongue to remove bacteria and freshen breath.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: How is dentin hypersensitivity diagnosed?

A: Dentin hypersensitivity is often diagnosed after a patient complains of sensitivity or pain in one or more teeth. Patients typically complain about sensitivity when eating cold or hot foods or when pressure is put on the tooth. Dentists may also notice sensitive areas of the mouth when performing a routine check-up.

Q: When should I see my dentist about sensitive teeth?

A: If you are experiencing sensitivity for more than three or four days, see your general dentist. The pain you are feeling may or may not be caused by dentin hypersensitivity. That's why it is important to discuss your symptoms as soon as they occur. It may save your teeth!

Q: How does a desensitizing toothpaste work?

A: Desensitizing toothpastes protect the dentin by blocking the tiny tubes that connect to the inner nerve center of each tooth. When these passageways are blocked, the nerve center is sheltered from feeling sensations.

WHAT MAKES AN AGD DENTIST A GREAT DENTIST?

A dentist who belongs to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) is one of 35,000 dentists dedicated to continuing their dental education to provide the best possible care to their patients.

An AGD dentist:

- Must complete at least 75 hours of continuing dental education every three years.
- Is educated and trained in all areas related to the diagnosis, treatment, and management of a patient's oral health.
- Is up-to-date on the latest dental procedures and technologies.
- Is dedicated to educating and enabling you to make the most informed dental health choices.



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of General Dentistry™

211 E. Chicago Avenue, Suite 900
Chicago, IL 60611
1.877.2X.A.YEAR (1.877.292.9327)
www.agd.org

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For dental health information and free advice, visit the Dental Advisor at www.KnowYourTeeth.com, where you can post questions that will be answered by an AGD dentist.