



Dr Grant McAree

Ask Dr. Grant



DR GRANT IS ONE OF THE LEADING COSMETIC DENTISTS IN THE SOUTH WEST AND HAS TREATED PATIENTS FROM ACROSS THE REGION AND BEYOND. HE HAS BEEN GRANTED PRACTISING PRIVILEGES AT NUFFIELD HOSPITAL, EXETER

Sensitive teeth – what’s the story?

What are we talking about?

One of the most common dental problems – teeth feeling sensitive, generally to hot, cold or sweet things. It may range from a mild twinge to severe discomfort lasting several hours. A tooth can become sensitive if the dentine layer under the enamel becomes exposed, usually where the teeth and gums meet and the enamel is naturally thinner. However, sensitive teeth may be a warning sign of a more serious dental problem.

Who does it affect?

Most of us will have suffered from sensitive teeth at one time or another and it can start at any age, although 20-40 is the most common age group in my experience. It also tends to affect women more than men.

What are the main causes?

Over-brushing, acid erosion/wear and receding gums are probably the top three causes I see at my practice, although it may also be due to a cracked tooth or filling, enamel being worn away due to teeth-grinding or the temporary result of teeth-whitening treatment.

What is ‘over-brushing’?

Over-brushing simply means brushing too hard or brushing side to side, either with a ‘normal’ manual brush or an electric toothbrush. Even though tooth enamel is the hardest substance in the human body,

it can be worn away over time through overly-aggressive brushing.

And what about acid erosion?

Acids in food and drinks can also weaken enamel through repeated, prolonged contact with teeth. Be warned that it’s not just obviously-acidic things like vinegar, fruit juice and oranges, but all types of fruit drinks and squash, other fruits like apples and grapes, fruit teas, raisins, all types of fizzy drinks and – sorry to say – wine.

What causes receding gums?

Gums can begin to shrink back for various reasons: the natural ageing process, over-brushing and even gum disease, where a build-up of plaque or tartar causes the gums to recede. The result is the same: the tiny holes or tubules in the root of the tooth – which are more sensitive, as they aren’t protected by a layer of enamel – become exposed.

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– TENZIN GYATSO**

What can I do to help?

Use specially-formulated toothpaste twice a day: ‘sensitive’ ones actually fill in the tubules, blocking off the nerves, and can also be rubbed onto sensitive areas; ‘acid erosion’ ones help to reharden the enamel. Be more aware of acids in food and drinks and think about cutting back on certain things and diluting fruit juices.

Anything else?

Use an electric toothbrush – electric brushes have been shown to clean more effectively than manual brushes, meaning you’re less likely to brush too hard and wear away the enamel or your gums. Allow the electric brush head to do the work though, gliding over each surface of your teeth – you don’t need to use a brushing action or to press like you do with a manual brush.

Any final thoughts?

Teeth can become sensitive again if you stop using ‘sensitive’ toothpaste or if you start to over-brush again. If teeth remain sensitive after a few weeks, despite changing your toothpaste and brushing habits, visit your dentist as it may be due to a cavity or other underlying cause. As ever, always go for trust and experience. **EL**

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