

Sensitivity

What is it caused by?

The part of the tooth we can see (the crown) has a top layer of enamel that protects the softer middle layer (dentine) underneath. If the dentine is exposed, a tooth can become sensitive. This usually happens where the tooth and the gum meet and the enamel layer is much thinner. Here are some common causes of sensitivity:

- Brushing too hard ('toothbrush abrasion'), and brushing from side to side, can cause enamel to be worn away - particularly where the teeth meet the gums. The freshly exposed dentine may then become sensitive.
- Dental erosion: this is loss of tooth enamel caused by attacks of acid from acidic food and drinks. If enamel is worn away, the dentine underneath is exposed which may lead to sensitivity.
- Gums may naturally recede (shrink back), and the roots of the teeth will become exposed and can be more sensitive. Root surfaces do not have an enamel layer to protect them. Usually happens as you get older but not necessarily to everyone.
- Gum disease: a build-up of plaque or tartar can cause the gum to recede down the tooth and even destroy the bony support of the tooth. Pockets can form in the gums around the tooth, making the area difficult to keep clean and the problem worse.
- Tooth grinding: this is a habit which involves clenching and grinding the teeth together. This can cause the enamel of the teeth to be worn away, making the teeth sensitive.
- A cracked tooth or filling: a cracked tooth is one that has become broken. A crack can run from the biting surface of a tooth down towards the root. Extreme temperatures, especially cold, may cause sensitivity.
- Tooth bleaching: some patients have sensitivity for a short time during bleaching or afterwards.

What can trigger sensitivity?

Sensitivity is usually triggered by drinking/eating hot or cold food/drinks or eating/drinking sugary or very acidic foods. Cold air when breathing in is also quite a common trigger. Also when clenching/grinding if stressed, or during a treatment such as bleaching.

What treatments are available?

- The dental team can offer a few treatments depending on the cause of the sensitivity. If you have toothbrush abrasion then these indentations at the gum line can sometimes be filled with a small white filling thus covering the exposed surface.
- Fluoride varnish/gel/mouth wash/toothpaste can be used as part of the treatment prescribed by a Dentist and applied by either Dentist or Hygienist or prescribed for use at home. This may require more than one session to relieve the sensitivity.
- Fillings, root canal or further restorative treatment may be required if the sensitivity is caused by cracked teeth or decay.

- Bite guards can be made by the dental team for you to wear at night if grinding/clenching is a problem or seeing another health care professional if this is being caused by stress or other external factors.

How can I prevent/reduce sensitivity at home?

- Brush and floss your teeth last thing at night and at least one other time during the day, with fluoride toothpaste. Consider using toothpaste specially designed for sensitive teeth. Brush for 2 minutes and then spit out the excess paste. **DO NOT RINSE.** This will then give the sensitive toothpaste a chance to build up the active ingredient to protect the tooth. Most sensitive toothpastes you need to use for 2 weeks before they have an effect due to the need to build up the active ingredient.
- Use a sensitive mouth wash during the day after meals to add extra protection.
- Use small, circular movements with a soft- to medium-bristled brush. Try to avoid brushing your teeth from side to side or use an electric toothbrush with pressure sensor and soft head.
- Change your toothbrush every two to three months, or sooner if it becomes worn.
- Have sugary foods, and fizzy and acidic drinks, less often. Try to have them just at mealtimes.
- If you grind your teeth, talk to your dental team about whether you should have a mouth guard made, to wear at night.
- If you are thinking about having your teeth bleached, discuss sensitivity with your dental team before starting treatment.
- Visit your dental team regularly, as often as they recommend.