

COVID bites: Cracked teeth another coronavirus scourge

24 September 2020, by Alan Mozes, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Dentists are drilling down on another worrying trend related to the coronavirus: more cracked teeth.

Like [sleepless nights](#) and stomach jitters, teeth grinding is a telltale sign of stress. And the habit—which can damage and break your choppers—is sending people to dental offices in growing numbers amid the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

"I have been seeing a lot of broken teeth lately—way more than I normally see," said Dr. Todd Bertman, a dentist in New York City.

"There is definitely an uptick in cases," agreed Avina Paranjpe, a professor of endodontics at the University of Washington School of Dentistry.

How much of an uptick? "Considering the number of cases we have seen at the university and in practice, I would say about a 30% to 35% increase in cases," Paranjpe said.

Following health guidelines, Bertman and his colleagues closed their facility between March 16 and May 18. "But we did continue to provide tele-dentistry," he said. "We would take emergencies through Zoom. Even at that point I was starting to see many cases of broken teeth. And then when we reopened, there were so many issues related to broken teeth that we really had to prioritize, focusing on handling these sorts of emergencies instead of cleanings."

Bertman and Paranjpe attributed the trend to rising stress levels during the pandemic.

"Stress," said Paranjpe, "is the main reason for the increase in the percentage of cracked teeth." People are dealing with changing job demands, economic fears, unfulfilled social needs or overarching medical concerns.

And COVID-19 stress is likely a widespread problem, with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warning that pandemic-induced anxiety "can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children."

That emotion can have dental consequences, said Bertman. A lot of his patients who now come in with broken teeth also report headaches and jaw pain, he noted. This suggests a rise in anxiety-driven jaw clenching, teeth grinding, [muscle spasms](#) and muscle stress.

Posture may be changing due to COVID concerns, and that can affect dental health, too, Bertman said.

"As we all scramble to find or put together a makeshift work station at home, it's likely that many of us end up in chairs that aren't comfortable and sitting in front of desks that aren't configured for good postural positioning," Bertman said.

The resulting bad posture can lead to pain in your jaw joint and in the muscles that control jaw

movement.

Teeth grinding is not uncommon. "And don't assume that you'll know if that's what's happening," warned Paranjpe. Until it's diagnosed, "I would say 50% of patients know they grind their teeth, and the other 50% are unaware."

Paranjpe cited some other factors that may contribute to the rise in tooth fractures, including a reluctance to visit dentists during the pandemic and/or the loss of work-based insurance to cover dental costs.

So what can you do to protect your smile?

Meditation to reduce pervasive stress can be helpful, suggested Bertman. "It brings you into the moment. And that can help you focus more on posture, which is important to be mindful of. Anything you can do—like stretching or repositioning— can be helpful."

Night guards are another preventive strategy. "Usually, if we know that a patient is grinding or clenching their teeth, they would be doing this at night, so we recommend a night guard," said Paranjpe.

But Bertman sounded a note of caution: "Don't do orthodontics by yourself."

He noted some people buy mail-order impressions for night guards. If it's not a simple case—and only a dentist will know that—they may have a problem. "The wrong fit can rearrange the bite, or cause discomfort, pain and loose [teeth](#), so don't diagnose yourself," he said.

More information: There's more on cracked teeth at the [American Association of Endodontists](#).

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APA citation: COVID bites: Cracked teeth another coronavirus scourge (2020, September 24) retrieved 31 May 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-covid-teeth-coronavirus-scurge.html>

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