

Question

Sensitive teeth: What treatments are available?

What causes sensitive teeth, and how can I treat my sensitive teeth?

Answer

from Alan Carr, D.M.D.

When you have sensitive teeth, activities such as brushing, flossing, eating and drinking can cause sharp, temporary pain in your teeth. Sensitive teeth are typically the result of worn tooth enamel or exposed tooth roots. Sometimes, however, tooth discomfort is caused by other factors, such as a cavity, a cracked or chipped tooth, or a side effect of a dental procedure, such as bleaching.

If you're concerned about sensitive teeth, start by visiting your dentist. He or she can identify or rule out any underlying causes of your tooth pain. Depending on the circumstances, your dentist might recommend:

- **Desensitizing toothpaste.** After several applications, desensitizing toothpaste can help block pain associated with sensitive teeth.
- **Fluoride.** Your dentist might apply fluoride to the sensitive areas of your teeth to strengthen tooth enamel and reduce pain.
- **Covering exposed root surfaces.** If receding gums are the cause of your sensitive teeth, your dentist might apply a sealant to cover the exposed tooth roots.
- **Root canal.** If your sensitive teeth cause severe pain and other treatments aren't effective, your dentist might recommend a root canal — a procedure used to treat problems in the tooth's soft core (dental pulp).

To prevent sensitive teeth from recurring, your dentist might offer suggestions to help you maintain your oral health. Twice a day, brush your teeth with a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. Floss daily. Avoid vigorous or harsh scrubbing, highly abrasive toothpaste, and excessive brushing and flossing. If you grind your teeth, ask your dentist about a mouth guard. Tooth grinding (bruxism)

can fracture teeth and cause sensitivity.

You might also consider limiting acidic foods and drinks, such as carbonated drinks, citrus fruits, wine and yogurt — all of which can remove tooth enamel. When you drink acidic liquids, use a straw to limit contact with your teeth. After eating or drinking an acidic substance, drink milk or water to balance the acid levels in your mouth. It also helps to avoid brushing your teeth immediately after eating or drinking acidic substances, since acid softens enamel and makes it more vulnerable to erosion during brushing.