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Daily grind strains teeth

By BRETT ROWLAND – browland@nwherald.com

CRYSTAL LAKE – Dentists are noticing a growing trend that might be grinding away at the community's dental health.

Teeth grinding, known as bruxism, is becoming a more common diagnosis at local dental offices as more people chew on economic stressors.

"People are working harder at their job or worried about losing their job," said Dr. Phillip Neal, a dentist with Crystal Lake Dental Associates. "In both adults and teens, we are seeing accelerated tooth wear."

Teeth grinding can result in headaches, jaw pain, and worn down enamel. It also can cause teeth and dental fillings to crack or break.

That's what happened to Angelique Dorchie of Cary.

The 35-year-old teacher and mother of two was concerned about losing her job and noticed that she had started grinding her teeth again. Dorchie has dealt with bruxism for several years but noticed it becoming more acute with the added stress.

"It got much worse when I was worried about losing my job," she said.

The grinding has worn down Dorchie's back teeth and cracked some of her fillings. Dorchie wears a special dental device at night to prevent further damage.

"It really becomes a medical issue and can lead to other problems," Neal said.

Stress is only one cause of bruxism.

It also can be caused by poor teeth alignment. Grinding and clenching also have been associated with acid reflux, and more recent studies link it to a subconscious desire to open airways, said Dr. Gene Sherman, an Algonquin dentist and member of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Sherman's practice, Dental Care Of Algonquin, also has seen an uptick in the number of patients being treated for bruxism.

"The urge to breathe is the strongest urge we have," he said. "Some studies show people may be subconsciously trying to open their airways by clenching or grinding at night."

The studies were presented at a recent American Academy of Sleep Medicine conference in Seattle, Sherman said.

Although it might seem logical for cases of bruxism to increase during a period of economic instability, not all dentists are seeing the trend play out at their practice.

"It would make sense that there would be more bruxism due to financial stresses," said Dr. Adam Ozment, president of the McHenry County Dental Society. "But it's not cropping up everywhere."

Dr. James Hasken, a McHenry dentist, said the number of patients he saw with teeth grinding problems had stayed relatively steady.

"[An increase] hasn't shown up in my practice," he said.



Dr. Phillip Neal (left) checks the teeth of Angelique Dorchie (center) of Cary with the help of Jonna Zurfluh, R.D.H., at Crystal Lake Dental Associates in Crystal Lake. Dorchie who has jaw problems wears a night guard to correct it. (Lauren M. Anderson – landerson@nwherald.com)

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The most common form of treatment is a night guard – a plastic device used to prevent grinding. The devices, built specifically for each patient, can vary in design and cost. Most range from around \$200 to about \$1,000. They often are covered by dental insurance plans.

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A sports mouth guard isn't an effective substitute for the dental devices, Ozment said. Mouth guards might prevent the teeth from grinding together, but they won't ease jaw or temporomandibular pain, he said.

Many grinders don't know they have a problem until told by another person, such as a spouse, who might notice the habit. Although some do it during the day, teeth grinding is often associated with sleep, Neal said.

Neal encourages grinders and clenchers to consult with their dentist about the problem and find a course of treatment before more serious and expensive dental or health problems surface.

One real danger of bruxism is wearing down the teeth to the point where costly restoration work is needed, Ozment said. Addressing the problem early is the best method of prevention, he said.



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