

A Pain in the Mouth:
Causes of and Remedies for Tooth Sensitivity

Sensitive Teeth

Tooth sensitivity is caused by decay or exposure of the dentin, the root of the tooth. The enamel, or outside shell of the tooth does not have any nerve endings, therefore protects the teeth from changes in pressure or temperature. The dentin is where all of the nerve fibers and nerve endings are located, so if part of the root is exposed it would cause sensitivity to heat, cold, sugar and even hard bristled toothbrushes. The dentin becomes exposed when the gum lines recede, which can result from a variety of causes.

One cause of recession of the gum line is excessive brushing or brushing too roughly. Patients with already thin gum tissues should be cautious of over-brushing. Once the gum line has receded it will not go back, leaving the dentin vulnerable to erosion by acids and sugars.

Decay of the tooth is another cause of tooth sensitivity. If the enamel decays the internal root would become increasingly irritated. If the decay advances the root may die causing severe pain which has been compared to the pain of giving birth.

The last cause of sensitivity is removal of decay from a tooth before a filling. The tooth may be sensitive from a few days up to a week, but will eventually go away.

How to Control Sensitivity

- Brush your teeth lightly around problem areas. Plaque removal only requires gently brushing. Also try using a soft brush.
- Try a type of toothpaste that contains fluoride. Fluoride makes teeth more resistant to erosion from acids and sweets.
- If the above methods are not effective, the dentist can make a fluoride varnish to cover and protect the exposed areas.
- Over time, teeth become less sensitive. With age, more dentin is laid down in the tooth making it less permeable and less susceptible to sensitivity.
- If the damage to the dentin or root of the tooth is irreversible, endodontic or root canal treatment may be necessary.

To find out more, consult Dr. Dautel or your hygienist at your next appointment.