



Using a Repeat Timer To Stop Clenching and Grinding

The Problem

Habitual clenching (or grinding) of your teeth can cause a variety of problems with your jaws and teeth. It can overtax your muscles and cause pain, just as you develop muscular aches and pains after working too hard at any repetitive, physically demanding task. Clenching and grinding also overstress your teeth, which can cause pain in periodontal ligaments and wearing down of dental enamel. Some patients have broken teeth by forceful and repetitive clenching and grinding. Clenching and grinding can also overstress and cause pain in and damage to the complicated structure of the temporomandibular joint.

Clenching and grinding can occur during the day or at night. Daytime clenching often occurs in stressful situations, but once begun it frequently becomes habitual and can occur in a range of situations; for example, when you're concentrating, exerting yourself physically, or driving. Clenching and grinding can also occur at night; the forces exerted during nighttime clenching and bruxing can be very intense, often resulting in tooth wear and muscle soreness on awakening. The technique described below is for changing your daytime clenching or grinding.

Most people are not aware that they clench or grind their teeth, and often learn of their habit after being told by their significant other or by a dentist who notices tooth wear of highly developed jaw-closing muscles. Because this habit can contribute to pain and structural damage, it is important to become aware of it and to begin to reduce it.

The first step is *awareness*, which includes:

1. Discovering those situations where you are more likely to clench and brux.
2. Becoming more sensitive to increases in muscle tension in your jaw (and other parts of your body).

Learning when and where you engage in this habit is important in effectively changing it.

The second step is to *change* the position of your jaws when you discover yourself clenching or grinding, in order to develop a new habit of holding your jaws in a relaxed position.

Although it sounds simple, don't underestimate the effort involved in making a change in a strong habit. It's very easy to become absorbed in tasks and forget what you are doing, and we tend to lose awareness of any constant sensations, including muscle tension. For example, you're probably not aware of the feel of your foot in your shoe, or your shirt or blouse on your arm...but you *can become* aware of these sensations if you direct your attention there. Using the repeat timer is a way of helping you learn to direct your attention to change a destructive habit.

THE PROCEDURE

A "repeat timer" is any timing device than you set for a number of minutes that will give you a signal at the end of the time period. A common kitchen timer with a dial to twist for settings from one to sixty minutes will do fine. These can be purchased at most stores selling kitchen equipment for about \$10.



1. Set the timer for 15 minutes.
2. When it goes off, first check the position of your jaws and teeth. Notice if they are together, and notice if you can feel any muscle tension (it is possible to be holding your jaws in such a way that your muscles are tense even though your teeth are not together). If you are learning progressive muscle relaxation training, this will help sensitize you to whether you have tension in your jaw muscles or not.
3. If you are clenching and/or tense, separate your teeth and relax the muscles of your jaw. If you have been given exercises for loosening your jaw muscles from your physical therapist, now is a good time to do them; or use any other strategies you might have, including imagery, to relax your jaws. If you can relax your whole body as much as possible, this will also help reduce tension in your facial muscles.
4. Set the time for another 15 minutes.
5. When you find that you were not tense and not clenching during three signals from the timer in a row, then set the timer for 20 minutes, and continue with the same checking and relaxing procedure. After three times without clenching and tension in a row, then begin setting the timer for 25 minutes, etc., gradually increasing the amount of time between checks as you begin to decrease your clenching and tension.

There are two alternatives for using the above procedure. You can begin using the timer as soon as you awaken, and continue throughout the day. You will learn more quickly when and where you are clenching and begin to make more comprehensive changes in your habit. Or, you can select one setting or situation and begin using the timer (e.g. at work between 9 and 12 o'clock, while watching television in the evening, while doing the afternoon housework, while driving to and from work); and gradually add other setting and situations until you have eventually monitored yourself throughout the day.

Once you have become more sensitive to the onset of tension and can stop it before you clench, you will then be able to more successfully monitor your behavior in new situations and stop yourself from clenching at times and places where you have not yet done any monitoring.

Finally, be patient with yourself, and recognize that it will likely take many weeks to make a change in habit that you might have been engaging in for several years. If you should find yourself clenching again after you thought you had broken the habit, recognize that it is probably because there is a new situation, new stressors, new demands, or some other change in your circumstances.