Probing the Conundrum of Cracked Teeth

Nothing like a toothache to ruin a good meal. Every bite you take makes you cringe—and a sip of something cold? You don’t want to go there. But you do want to go to your dentist, even if the pain isn’t constant. Your painful tooth may have a crack in it.

Getting a crack in your tooth is relatively easy—even just grinding your teeth puts you at risk. In fact, more than two-thirds of dental patients have at least one tooth with a crack in it. But finding that crack can be difficult. Cracks in teeth often don’t show up on an x-ray and many are too shallow to hurt, although they still pose a risk to your tooth.

So dentists in the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network studied a large group of patients to see which teeth and which patients are most likely to develop a crack. They are also looking at how quickly a cracked tooth can change.

**Common features of teeth that get cracks**

Armed with an array of sophisticated tools including high-powered magnifiers and lights that can illuminate the inside of a tooth, the researchers found that:

- Patients who had a painful cracked tooth were somewhat more likely than others to clench or grind their teeth, be female, and under age 65
- Having a filling doesn’t affect whether a cracked tooth will be painful, but having a molar that is more worn from grinding makes it more likely that a cracked tooth will be painful
- Cracks that are stained (say, from your coffee habit) were the least likely to cause pain or sensitivity.

**What to do about a cracked tooth**

The best time and way to treat a cracked tooth is still being investigated in the study. Most of the time, cracked teeth can be treated with a filling or crown; more involved treatment such as a root canal or pulling the tooth is needed much less frequently.

If your dentist tells you that you have a cracked tooth, it’s very important to see your dentist on a regular basis so they can monitor the tooth for changes. This will give your dentist the opportunity to recommend treatment to help prevent further problems that require more extensive treatment.


To ensure excellent dental care, the Network carries out our studies in real-world settings—like your dentist’s office—with regular patients like yourself who volunteer to participate. The studies wouldn’t be possible without the involvement of our wonderful patients. Thanks to everyone who participated in this and all of our studies!