

## **Tooth Sensitivity**

### **What is dentin hypersensitivity?**

Dentin hypersensitivity, more commonly referred to as sensitive teeth, can be defined as short, sharp pains that come from exposed dentin (the layer of tissue found beneath the hard enamel that contains the inner pulp). Individuals with sensitive teeth may find that the pain can be triggered by hot, cold, sour, or sweet beverages or foods, forceful brushing or flossing, or even by cold air.

### **What causes the sensitivity?**

Tooth sensitivity is caused by the movement of fluid within tiny tubes (pores) located in the dentin, which results in nerve irritation. When the hard enamel of a tooth is worn down or gums have receded, the surfaces of these tiny tubes can become exposed, resulting in pain while eating or drinking certain foods, such as ice cream or hot coffee.

### **How common is this condition?**

Dentin hypersensitivity is one of the most common complaints among dental patients. One in five people in the United States experience dentin hypersensitivity at some point in his or her life.

### **How can I avoid dentin hypersensitivity?**

Excessive consumption of acidic beverages, such as orange juice or soda, can wear down hard enamel and put you at risk for dentin hypersensitivity. Limiting your consumption of acidic foods and beverages can prevent the erosion of hard enamel. Conditions such as bulimia nervosa and acid reflux also can have similar erosive effects on tooth enamel. Abrasion of the enamel from aggressive use of a toothbrush also can lead to dentin hypersensitivity. Notify your dentist if you experience tooth sensitivity. He or she can monitor the condition and can help remedy the sensitivity.

### **I have dentin hypersensitivity. What can I do to prevent pain?**

Using a soft-bristled toothbrush and brushing in a circular motion will minimize enamel abrasion and thus reduce sensitivity. Using toothpaste containing a desensitizing agent that protects exposed dentin by blocking the tubes connected to nerves can alleviate pain. In-office treatments, such as topical agents or sealants, can be applied by the dentist to help reduce sensitivity. Of course, limiting your intake of acidic foods and beverages is always recommended.

**What other issue might be associated with dentin hypersensitivity?**

Research suggests that sensitivity in the mouth may be associated with sensitivity in other areas. A study published in the 2002 November/December issue of General Dentistry examined 47 individuals with dentin hypersensitivity and found that all participants showed sensitivities in another area such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, or touch. Sight sensitivity, specifically to sunlight, was the most common association.