

By Krisha McCoy, MS Medically reviewed by Niya Jones MD, MPH

10 Bad Habits That Can Harm Your Teeth

Common Dental Health Trouble-Makers

Do you crunch on ice or clench your jaw? Stop — you could be damaging your teeth. In fact, you should nix all 10 of these dental health no-nos.



Are you wrecking your teeth without even knowing it? If you suck your thumb or suck on lemons, you're doing your pearly whites wrong. And did you know that biting your nails is not only bad for your fingers, it can actually hurt your teeth, too?

While some of these dental health “don'ts” can do immediate damage to your teeth (by cracking or breaking them), the effects of others may add up over time, harming your dental health in the long run. So put all 10 of these bad habits to rest — for your teeth's sake.



1. Thumbs Down on Thumb Sucking

Children who still suck their fingers or thumbs after their permanent teeth start coming in — usually around the age of 5 or 6 — could be causing permanent changes that affect tooth and jaw structure. Specifically, thumb sucking can cause a misalignment of the teeth, explains Richard Price, DMD, a retired dentist from the Boston area who is a consumer advisor and spokesperson for the American Dental Association. This misalignment can lead to a number of issues, including difficulty chewing and breathing problems — so help wean your child off his thumb.



2. Lay Off the Lemons

People who suck lemons may be putting their dental health in jeopardy. Why? Lemons are very acidic, says Elisa Mello, DDS, a cosmetic dentist at NYC Smile Design in New York City. "The acidity corrodes the enamel [of the teeth]."

Repeated exposure to acidic substances can cause tooth enamel to erode, creating a rough texture on the surface of your teeth, adds Dr. Price.



3. Don't Brush Too Hard

Brushing your teeth regularly is part of good oral hygiene, but if you brush too vigorously, you can cause more harm than good. Brushing your teeth too hard can wear down enamel, irritate your gums, make your teeth sensitive to cold, and even cause cavities. To avoid these problems, Price recommends using a soft bristled toothbrush. "Just look for the letters ADA [American Dental Association] on the box, which means the bristles are firm enough to remove plaque, but soft enough not to cause damage," he advises.



4. Refrain From Jaw Clenching and Tooth Grinding

For some people, stress can trigger frequent clenching of the jaw or grinding of the teeth. "There is a severe amount of pressure on your teeth when you do that, and you can get microfractures or actual fractures in your teeth," warns Dr. Mello. Microfractures are weakened areas in your teeth that puts them at risk for further damage. Jaw clenching or tooth grinding can also damage dental work.



5. Do You Crunch on Ice? Cool It

Ice cubes may seem harmless, but Price has these words of advice: "Beware of the killer cube." The cold temperature and the hardness of ice cubes can cause serious damage to your teeth. "Our teeth are designed to crush through things, not against something," says Mello. Even though crunching ice with your teeth may be easy, keep in mind, says Price, that "your blender needs special blades to crush ice."



6. Your Teeth Are Not a Tool

Many people use their teeth to break off a tag on clothing, rip open a package of potato chips, or even unscrew bottle tops. But according to Price, teeth are meant to help us do three things: Chew food, speak properly, and look better when we smile. "Teeth are not pliers, teeth are not hooks," he says. Using your teeth as a tool is a threat to dental health and can damage dental work or cause your teeth to crack.



7. Don't Park Your Pencil Between Your Teeth

Some people have a habit of holding objects — such as pens, pencils, or eyeglasses — between their teeth when concentrating on a difficult task. But they might not realize how much pressure they're placing on their teeth as they bite down on a non-food object, says Mello. Biting on a pen or a similar object can cause your teeth to shift or even crack. "[It can also] break existing dental work that you have in your mouth," warns Mello.



8. Boycott Nail Biting

Biting your nails doesn't just harm the appearance of your hands — it can also damage your teeth and become an oral hygiene issue. "People who bite their nails usually do it chronically," notes Mello. Regularly biting your nails can cause your teeth to move out of place. In addition, nail biting could potentially cause teeth to break or tooth enamel to splinter.



9. Say No to Soda

Always have a soda on hand? Carbonated drinks can be bad for your teeth, because they tend to be very acidic. "Even if it's diet, the acidity of [soda] is just corroding your enamel," Mello says. The effects of soda on teeth are even worse if you slowly sip it over a long period of time. "People don't realize they are bathing their teeth in acid for an hour," she adds. The acidity in soda can lead to dental health problems such as decay around your gum line and loss of enamel.



10. Use Toothpicks Carefully

When used properly, toothpicks can help keep the areas between your teeth clean. "If you do it carefully, [using toothpicks] is helpful," says Mello. "If you don't, you are going to hurt your gum tissue." So be careful not to get too aggressive with that toothpick in your quest for oral hygiene. According to Mello, nothing you do to your teeth or gums should ever hurt — if it does, it may be damaging your teeth.