



Teeth Are Not Tools

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"Can you fit me in? I just broke my front tooth."

(Sarah was opening a bag with her teeth.)

"My porcelain laminate cracked in half. How soon can you see me?"

(Jimmy was using his teeth to cut a piece of tape.)

Many people have been guilty at some point of using their teeth to open a bottle or jar that's too tight, rip open a bag of potato chips, tear a piece of plastic tape, yank a price tag from a clothing item, cut a wire, clip a fingernail and even crack a pecan. But dentists at the Texas A&M Health Science Center Baylor College of Dentistry say that most cases of chipped or broken teeth happen when teeth are used as tools rather than chewing instruments. They also warn that chewing ice — even crushed ice — should be avoided. Use your teeth for the purpose they were intended, and they will be yours for a lifetime.

Many people damage their teeth by using them inappropriately. Here are a few things that you should avoid doing with your teeth in order to keep them as healthy as possible:

Opening Containers

Whether it's a beer bottle, candy bar, blister pack or one of those waterproof FedEx envelopes — resist the urge to use your teeth to help you open it. Your teeth were not meant to open these things! You can even break a crown (capped tooth) doing this.

Cutting and Stripping

We are often tempted to use our teeth to cut a plastic tie. While teeth are poorly suited for this task, scissors are the perfect tool for such jobs. Don't be too lazy to go and find a pair. Another bad habit is using teeth to cut

clear packing tape when the packing tape doesn't come with a built-in cutter.

As a kid, I often used wires, batteries, light bulbs, and small electric motors to build fun contraptions. The easiest way to remove the insulation from the copper wiring was to bite on it with my two front teeth. I got to the point where I could do it very efficiently. Luckily, my father caught me doing this one day and told me I would ruin my teeth if I didn't stop. He was right! Fortunately, no permanent damage occurred and I started using wire cutters.

Holding with a "Third Hand"

Many tailors and dressmakers use their front teeth to hold pins. Over time, they will wear small holes in the teeth where the pins are placed. One of my patients who used to do this has very small but visible holes on the bottom of her upper teeth. A similar thing can happen when construction workers hold nails in their teeth.

Using your teeth to hold things can damage your teeth in the long run. Also, if you suddenly have to hiccup or yawn, holding objects with your teeth might cause you to choke.

Chewing On Foreign Objects

If you visit a third grade classroom, you will see many kids chewing on their pencils. Similarly, many children get in the habit of biting their fingernails. If they continue, it can damage their permanent teeth. Although addicting, stress-relieving,

and sometimes "cool," biting on foreign objects can weaken or crack your teeth, chip them, and cause loss of tooth structure.

Cracking Nuts or Opening Seeds

This is the big test for me. I love pumpkin seeds (*bizer*). I can understand not using my teeth to open walnuts. As good as the nut tastes, it is clear to most people that you need to use something better suited than your teeth to crack the shell. A nutcracker perhaps? But *bizer*?! Why should that be a problem?

Over time, the salty shell of the pumpkin seeds will act like sandpaper on your teeth, wearing away bits of enamel each time you open a seed. If you do this regularly, you will eventually be able to see where you've worn away your teeth. Some of my serious *bizer* eaters take pride in the grooves that they have worn in their upper and lower teeth, which allow them to open the seeds more easily.

A Tool Too Precious To Abuse

Teeth serve many functions. They were designed to chew food, structurally support our lips and cheeks, and help us speak properly. A healthy set of teeth also adds to your overall appearance and gives you an attractive smile.

If you want your teeth to function properly, you have to protect and take care of them. As long as you use your teeth for their intended purpose, and don't abuse them, you will be able to keep your teeth working well for a long time.