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Meta Title: Why Are My Teeth So Sensitive? A Diagnostic Guide | Brunswick, OH

Meta Description: Tooth sensitivity has 7 common causes — from worn enamel to clenching to hidden cavities. A Brunswick, OH dentist walks through how to identify which is yours and how to fix it.

Why Are My Teeth So Sensitive? A Diagnostic Guide for Brunswick Patients

Tooth sensitivity is one of the most common dental complaints — and one of the most frustrating, because the cause isn't always obvious. Sensitivity can come from worn enamel, gum recession, cracked teeth, cavities, recent dental work, clenching or grinding, or aggressive whitening. Each cause has its own treatment path. The key is figuring out which one applies to you, because trying to fix the wrong problem doesn't work and usually makes patients think sensitivity is just something they have to live with. It isn't.

At Hendricks Family Dentistry in Brunswick, OH, we help patients diagnose the real source of their sensitivity — and then treat it. Dr. Jamison P. Hendricks, Dr. Tonya Frys, and Dr. Anthony Lyamichev have seen every version of this problem, and in most cases, the fix is more straightforward than patients expect once we've identified the underlying cause.

This guide walks through the seven most common causes of tooth sensitivity, how to recognize each one, and what actually solves them.

What Tooth Sensitivity Actually Is

Before we get into causes, it helps to understand what's happening inside a sensitive tooth.

Your tooth has two main protective layers. The outer layer is enamel — the hardest substance in the human body. Underneath enamel is dentin, a softer layer filled with thousands of microscopic tubules that connect directly to the nerve inside the tooth.

When enamel is intact and gums cover the roots, those tubules are protected. When something exposes them — whether from wear, recession, cracks, or decay — cold, heat, sweetness, or even air can travel down the tubules and stimulate the nerve. That's the sharp jolt you feel.

Which means every case of tooth sensitivity comes down to the same underlying question: what's exposing your dentin? The answer determines everything about treatment.

The 7 Most Common Causes of Tooth Sensitivity

1. Enamel Erosion from Acidic Foods and Drinks

The single most common cause of adult sensitivity is gradual enamel wear from acidic foods and drinks. Coffee, soda, citrus, sports drinks, wine, and even sparkling water are all acidic enough to slowly erode enamel over years.

You'll notice this kind of sensitivity in multiple teeth at once, often across the whole mouth, and it tends to get worse gradually rather than appearing suddenly. Cold liquids trigger it most reliably.

Treatment: dietary adjustments, fluoride treatments to strengthen remaining enamel, and prescription-strength desensitizing toothpaste. In advanced cases, bonded restorations can cover the exposed dentin.

2. Gum Recession Exposing Tooth Roots

When gums pull back from the teeth, they expose the tooth root — which has no enamel covering at all. Roots are far more sensitive than the crowns of teeth, so recession-related sensitivity tends to be sharp and localized.

This is the most common cause of sensitivity in adults over 40. You may see visible "long teeth" where more of the tooth appears above the gum line than before. Sensitivity is usually worse on the teeth closest to the gum line.

Causes of recession include aggressive brushing, gum disease, genetics, and — surprisingly — clenching or grinding, which puts stress on the gum tissue. Treatment ranges from switching to a soft-bristled brush and desensitizing products to gum grafting in more advanced cases.

3. Cracked or Micro-Fractured Teeth

Tiny cracks in teeth — often called craze lines or hairline fractures — are frequently invisible to the eye but very much felt. They typically develop from clenching, grinding, chewing on ice or hard objects, or age-related wear.

Sensitivity from cracks tends to be sharp and localized to a single tooth. It's often triggered by chewing (not just cold) and can feel like a jolt when you release pressure after biting down. This is one of the most under-diagnosed causes of sensitivity because cracks don't show up well on standard X-rays.

If your sensitivity is limited to one tooth and hurts when you chew, cracks are worth investigating. We use [advanced diagnostic tools](#) — including 3D imaging — to identify cracks that other exams miss.

4. Developing or Untreated Cavities

Early-stage tooth decay can cause sensitivity before any visible damage appears and before the tooth actually hurts on its own. When decay penetrates enamel and reaches the dentin, cold and sweet foods can trigger sensitivity in the affected tooth.

The telltale sign: sensitivity that's localized to one specific tooth, often triggered by both cold and sweet foods, and getting worse over weeks. This is the type of sensitivity you don't want to ignore — early treatment with a small filling is dramatically easier than treating a cavity that's grown large enough to reach the pulp.

Regular [dental cleanings and exams](#) catch these before they progress. If we find one, most cavities are treated with a same-visit filling.

5. Bruxism (Clenching and Grinding)

Clenching and grinding — called bruxism — is a major and frequently missed cause of sensitivity. It creates sensitivity through multiple pathways at once: it wears down enamel, causes micro-cracks in teeth, contributes to gum recession, and can even cause pulp inflammation in severely affected teeth.

Signs you may be a clencher or grinder:

- Waking up with jaw soreness or a tired jaw
- Frequent tension headaches, especially in the temples
- Flat or worn-looking edges on your teeth
- Widespread sensitivity that doesn't seem to have a single cause
- A partner who's told you that you grind at night
- Jaw clicking or popping

Bruxism is the single most under-treated cause of adult sensitivity — because most patients don't realize they're doing it. Treatment options range from custom nightguards to Botox for TMJ, both of which we offer. This particular cause is important enough that we've written a full follow-up article on it, linked at the bottom of this guide.

6. Recent Dental Work

Sensitivity after a filling, crown, or deep cleaning is common and usually temporary. New restorations sometimes need a few days or weeks to settle, and the tooth's nerve may be temporarily irritated by the procedure.

This kind of sensitivity typically resolves on its own within 2–4 weeks. If it persists longer or gets worse, contact your dentist — it may indicate a high bite (where the new restoration is contacting other teeth too hard) or, rarely, that the tooth's nerve was more affected by decay than initially visible.

7. Whitening-Related Sensitivity

Both professional and over-the-counter teeth whitening can cause temporary sensitivity, especially in patients who already had thin enamel or existing sensitivity. This is because whitening gels temporarily open the dentin tubules to lift stains.

This sensitivity is temporary and usually resolves within a few days of stopping whitening treatment. Using potassium nitrate toothpaste before, during, and after whitening dramatically reduces sensitivity. If you're planning to whiten, talk to us first — we can customize a protocol that minimizes sensitivity.

How to Figure Out Which One Is Yours

Here's a diagnostic framework based on how patients typically describe their sensitivity.

Sharp, one specific tooth, hurts when chewing

Most likely: cracked tooth or cavity. Book an exam soon — these tend to get worse without treatment.

Widespread, worse in the morning, jaw soreness

Most likely: bruxism. Sensitivity from clenching and grinding typically feels like a general low-level ache across multiple teeth, sometimes worse first thing in the morning.

Multiple teeth, gradual onset, worse with cold drinks

Most likely: enamel erosion from acidic diet, or age-related wear. Often correlates with a coffee, tea, soda, or wine habit.

Teeth close to the gum line, visibly "longer" teeth

Most likely: gum recession. Common in adults over 40 and in patients who brush aggressively.

New sensitivity after a filling or crown

Most likely: temporary post-treatment sensitivity. Wait 2–4 weeks; if not improving, contact us for a bite check.

Sensitivity after whitening

Most likely: whitening irritation. Stop the whitening, use potassium nitrate toothpaste, and give it 3–7 days.

Important caveat: Multiple causes can be present at once. Someone in their 50s may have both gum recession AND bruxism AND enamel erosion contributing to sensitivity. Treating just one when the others are also active is why some patients feel like their sensitivity "never really goes away." A proper diagnostic exam looks at all of these together.

When Sensitivity Is a Warning Sign

Not all sensitivity requires an urgent visit. But some patterns are worth acting on quickly.

Book soon if you experience:

- Sharp pain that lingers for 30 seconds or longer after a cold or hot stimulus is removed
- Sensitivity that's clearly localized to one specific tooth
- Sensitivity that wakes you up at night
- Sensitivity that's getting significantly worse over weeks
- Sensitivity combined with visible discoloration or a dark spot on the tooth
- Sensitivity plus swelling or gum tenderness in the area

These patterns can indicate cracks, cavities that have reached the pulp, or infections that need immediate treatment. Early treatment is almost always simpler and less expensive than treatment that's been delayed.

What Actually Helps at Home

If you're waiting for an appointment or dealing with mild sensitivity, several things genuinely help:

Sensitivity toothpaste with potassium nitrate.

Brands like Sensodyne, Colgate Sensitive, and Crest Sensitive all use potassium nitrate to calm nerve signals over time. It takes 2–4 weeks of consistent daily use to feel the full effect.

Soft-bristled toothbrush and gentle technique.

A soft-bristled brush used with light pressure protects both enamel and gums. Aggressive brushing with a hard-bristled brush is one of the fastest ways to worsen recession-related sensitivity.

Reduce acid exposure.

If you drink coffee, soda, wine, or citrus, use a straw when possible, rinse with water afterward, and don't brush for 30 minutes after (brushing acidic teeth spreads the acid). Never brush immediately after eating citrus or drinking soda.

Fluoride rinse before bed.

An over-the-counter fluoride rinse (like ACT) used at night helps remineralize enamel. Don't rinse with water afterward — let the fluoride sit.

Address clenching if you notice signs.

If you catch yourself clenching during the day, consciously relax your jaw. If jaw soreness in the morning suggests night clenching, that's a sign to talk to us about protective options.

Why an In-Office Diagnostic Visit Is the Fastest Path to Relief

Home remedies help with mild sensitivity, but if your sensitivity has persisted more than a few weeks, an in-office diagnostic visit is by far the most efficient path to lasting relief.

Here's what we can identify in a single 45-minute visit that home tools can't:

- Cracks and micro-fractures using specialized transillumination and 3D imaging
- Cavities before they cause more damage, using digital X-rays
- Evidence of clenching and grinding through wear patterns visible only to a trained eye
- Gum recession measurements to establish a baseline
- Enamel thickness and areas of erosion
- Bite issues that may be contributing to sensitivity in specific teeth

From there, we build a treatment plan tailored to your actual causes — not a guess. Most patients see meaningful improvement within a few weeks of starting the right treatment.

Ready to Find the Real Cause?

Living with sensitivity isn't inevitable. It's a symptom with a cause, and once we identify the cause, treatment is usually more straightforward than patients expect.

If you suspect clenching or grinding is contributing to your sensitivity — which is more common than most people realize — see our companion article: [The Hidden Connection Between Jaw Clenching and Tooth Sensitivity](#) [to be linked once published].

Schedule a diagnostic sensitivity exam at Hendricks Family Dentistry on Center Road by calling [\(330\) 225-1433](tel:330-225-1433) today.