

Habits That Quietly Wear Down Teeth: Ice, Nails, Pens, and More

By JoD Lifestyle · 6 min read

Most of us picture tooth damage as something dramatic: a fall, a hockey puck, biting into an olive pit. But a lot of wear happens quietly, over months and years, through habits so ordinary we barely notice them. The cup of ice at the end of lunch. The pen cap you chew during a long call. The stubborn chip bag you open with your molars.

None of these feels like much in the moment. Enamel is the hardest tissue in the body, so it can take repeated low-level stress without obvious complaint. The catch is that enamel does not grow back. Once it wears, chips, or cracks, it stays that way until a dentist repairs it. Understanding which habits add up can help you protect teeth you would otherwise take for granted.

Why small habits matter more than you would think

Teeth are built for chewing food, not for crushing hard objects or prying things apart. Enamel handles compression well, but it is brittle against sudden, concentrated force and against the kind of grinding, twisting pressure these habits create. A single bite on an ice cube rarely does visible harm. Thousands of them, year after year, are a different story.

Two things tend to happen. The first is gradual wear, where the biting surfaces flatten and thin over time. The second is a crack, which can start as a tiny line and spread. Cracks are tricky because they may not hurt at first and can be hard to see, even on an X-ray. A dentist can often spot early signs during an exam, which is one reason routine check-ups matter even when nothing feels wrong.

The usual suspects

Chewing ice

Ice is cold, hard, and unforgiving. Crunching it puts sharp force on enamel and can also stress existing fillings or crowns. The cold itself may make teeth more brittle in that moment. People who chew ice often do it absent-mindedly, which makes it one of the easier habits to miss and one of the more common causes of chips a dentist sees.

Biting fingernails

Nail biting pulls the front teeth in directions they were not designed to move. Over time this can chip edges, wear down biting surfaces, and in some cases strain the jaw. It can also transfer bacteria from hands to mouth. If you bite your nails during stressful moments, the habit may be worth addressing for your teeth as much as your fingers.

Chewing pens, pencils, and glasses arms

Many people chew on objects while concentrating. The problem is not a single bite but the repeated clamping and grinding, which can wear enamel and occasionally crack a tooth. Hard plastic and metal are especially rough on the biting edges of front teeth.

Using teeth as tools

Opening packages, tearing tape, holding pins, loosening bottle caps: teeth get recruited for all sorts of jobs. Each one applies force at an odd angle, which is exactly the kind of stress enamel tolerates least. A tooth that has already had a filling or a root canal can be more vulnerable to fracturing this way.

Grinding and clenching

This one is a little different because it often happens during sleep or under stress, outside conscious control. Persistent grinding can flatten teeth and lead to sensitivity. If you wake with a sore jaw or notice your teeth looking shorter or worn, it is worth mentioning at your next visit so your dentist can assess whether a night guard or other approach makes sense for you.

Signs your teeth may be taking a beating

- New sensitivity to hot, cold, or sweet foods
- Rough or jagged edges you can feel with your tongue
- Teeth that look shorter, flatter, or more translucent at the edges
- A small chip you noticed but told yourself was fine
- Occasional sharp pain when biting in one specific spot, which can be a sign of a crack

These signs do not automatically mean something is wrong, and they can have other causes. They are simply worth noticing. A dentist can tell the difference between normal variation and wear that needs attention following an examination.

When a worn or chipped tooth needs attention

A small chip on a back tooth may need nothing more than monitoring. A larger chip, a crack, or steady wear across several teeth is a different situation, and the right response depends on how much tooth structure is affected. Options a dentist might discuss range from smoothing a rough edge to bonding, a filling, or a crown. If you are dealing with a tooth that has already chipped, clinics that offer [repair worn or chipped teeth](#) can walk you through what the tooth actually needs rather than a one-size-fits-all fix. Individual cases differ, and an in-person assessment is the only way to know for certain.

How to break the habit (gently)

Willpower alone rarely works for habits that run on autopilot. A few practical substitutions tend to help more.

- **Swap the object.** If you chew ice, try letting it melt instead, or switch to chilled water. If you chew pens, keep a stress ball or chewing gum nearby.
- **Remove the trigger.** Order drinks without ice, or ask for a smaller amount. Keep scissors and a bottle opener where you usually reach for your teeth.
- **Notice the moment.** Many of these habits spike during stress or deep focus. Naming when it happens makes it easier to interrupt.
- **Treat the root cause.** For grinding and nail biting tied to anxiety, addressing the stress itself can do more than any dental fix.

If a habit has been with you for years, be patient. Progress usually looks like fewer slips over time rather than a clean break on day one.

Frequently asked questions

Is chewing ice actually bad for teeth?

It can be. Ice is hard and cold, and repeated crunching may chip enamel or stress fillings and crowns. Occasional ice is unlikely to cause harm for most people, but a frequent habit adds up. If you find ice irresistible, it is worth mentioning to your dentist, since a strong craving to chew ice can sometimes be linked to other health factors worth checking.

Can a chipped tooth get worse if I leave it?

It depends on the chip. Some stay stable for a long time, while others create a rough edge that catches, worsens, or lets decay start. Because it is hard to judge on your own, having a dentist look at it is the safest way to know whether to watch it or repair it.

Why do my teeth look shorter than they used to?

Gradual flattening of the biting edges can come from grinding, clenching, or years of wear, and sometimes from acidic foods and drinks as well. It usually happens slowly enough that you only notice in old photos. A dentist can assess the cause and whether anything needs doing.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — general guidance on protecting teeth and when to see a dentist
- [Government of Canada — Oral health](#) — plain-language resources on everyday care and prevention

Published by Joy of Dentistry (jodmagazine.com). Educational content only; it is not a substitute for a professional dental examination and individual advice.