

Occlusal Splints: Purpose, Types, Benefits and Usage

Ethan Brown*

Department of Biotechnology, University of British Columbia, Canada

Introduction

An occlusal splint, also known as a bite splint or night guard, is a removable dental appliance designed to protect teeth and temporomandibular joints (TMJ) from excessive wear and strain. It is commonly used to treat conditions such as bruxism (teeth grinding), temporomandibular joint disorders (TMD), and bite misalignment. Occlusal splints work by creating a barrier between the upper and lower teeth, preventing damage caused by grinding and clenching. Dental professionals often recommend occlusal splints as a conservative, non-invasive treatment option to alleviate pain and discomfort associated with jaw disorders. These appliances help distribute bite forces evenly, reduce muscle tension, and prevent tooth wear and fractures. With advancements in dental technology, modern occlusal splints are customized for optimal fit and comfort, making them an effective solution for many patients. Occlusal splints, also known as bite splints or night guards, are custom-made dental appliances designed to protect teeth and temporomandibular joints (TMJ) from excessive wear and strain. They are commonly used to manage conditions such as bruxism (teeth grinding), temporomandibular joint disorders (TMD), and bite misalignment. These devices function by creating a barrier between the upper and lower teeth, preventing direct contact and reducing damage caused by clenching and grinding. Bruxism, a prevalent condition affecting millions of individuals worldwide, often occurs unconsciously during sleep, leading to tooth wear, jaw pain, and headaches [1,2]. Occlusal splints help distribute bite forces evenly, alleviate muscle tension, and prevent long-term dental complications. Similarly, for individuals suffering from TMD, occlusal splints aid in repositioning the jaw and relieving pressure on the TMJ, reducing discomfort and improving jaw function [3,4]. This article explores the purpose, types, benefits, and maintenance of occlusal splints, highlighting their significance in dental care and overall oral health. Understanding how occlusal splints work and their role in dental treatment can help patients make informed decisions about their oral health management.

Purpose of occlusal splints

Occlusal splints serve multiple functions in dental treatment and management of jaw disorders. The primary purposes include:

Bruxism management: Many individuals unconsciously grind or clench their teeth, especially during sleep. This habit can cause tooth wear, fractures, sensitivity, and jaw pain. Occlusal splints act as a protective barrier, minimizing the effects of bruxism and preventing further damage [5,6].

Temporomandibular joint disorder (TMD) treatment: TMD is a condition affecting the jaw joints and muscles, often leading to pain, clicking sounds, and difficulty in jaw movement. Occlusal splints help reposition the jaw and reduce strain on the TMJ.

Bite alignment correction: For patients with an improper bite (malocclusion), occlusal splints aid in realigning the teeth and improving occlusal balance [7,8].

Protection during sports: While not a direct replacement for sports mouthguards, occlusal splints can offer some protection against impact-related dental injuries.

Post-dental treatment support: After dental procedures such as orthodontic treatments or restorative work, occlusal splints can help maintain the new bite position and protect dental restorations from excessive force.

Types of occlusal splints

Several types of occlusal splints are available, each designed to address specific dental conditions. The most common types include:

Soft occlusal splints: Made from flexible, soft materials, these splints are generally recommended for mild bruxism cases. They are comfortable to wear but may not be as durable as hard splints [9].

Hard acrylic splints: Constructed from rigid acrylic material, these splints provide superior protection and durability. They are commonly used for moderate to severe bruxism and TMD treatment.

Dual-layered splints: These splints have a soft inner layer for comfort and a hard outer layer for durability. They offer a balance between comfort and protection.

Repositioning splints: Used primarily for TMD treatment, these splints help adjust the position of the lower jaw to relieve stress on the TMJ.

Anterior bite splints: Designed to cover only the front teeth, these splints help reduce muscle tension and are often used for severe cases of bruxism.

Benefits of occlusal splints

Occlusal splints provide several benefits, making them a valuable tool in preventive and therapeutic dentistry. Some of the key benefits include:

Prevention of tooth wear and fractures: By acting as a barrier, occlusal splints protect the enamel from excessive grinding and clenching forces [10].

Relief from jaw pain and discomfort: Patients suffering from TMD often experience pain and stiffness in the jaw. Occlusal splints help alleviate these symptoms by reducing pressure on the TMJ.

Reduction in headaches and facial pain: Chronic bruxism and jaw tension can contribute to headaches and facial pain. Using an occlusal splint can help minimize these discomforts.

*Corresponding author: Ethan Brown, Department of Biotechnology, University of British Columbia, Canada, Email: brown678@gmail.com

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Improved sleep quality: Bruxism-related discomfort can disrupt sleep. Wearing an occlusal splint can lead to better rest by reducing nighttime grinding.

Prevention of gum recession and tooth sensitivity: Excessive grinding can lead to gum recession and exposed tooth roots, causing sensitivity. Occlusal splints help prevent these complications.

Long-term cost savings: Preventing tooth damage and reducing the need for extensive dental treatments can save money in the long run.

Usage and maintenance of occlusal splints

To ensure the effectiveness and longevity of an occlusal splint, proper usage and maintenance are essential. Here are some key guidelines:

Wearing instructions: Dentists typically recommend wearing the splint at night, but some cases may require daytime use. Follow the dentist's instructions for best results.

Cleaning and storage:

Rinse the splint with water before and after use.

Clean it daily with a soft toothbrush and mild soap or denture cleaner.

Avoid using hot water, as it can distort the splint.

Store the splint in a ventilated case when not in use.

Regular dental check-ups: Periodic visits to the dentist are necessary to check the fit and effectiveness of the splint and to make any adjustments if needed.

Avoiding harmful habits: Do not chew on the splint or expose it to harsh chemicals, as this can cause damage.

Conclusion

Occlusal splints play a crucial role in protecting teeth, alleviating jaw discomfort, and preventing long-term dental issues related to bruxism and TMD. They offer a simple yet effective solution for managing oral health conditions, improving bite alignment, and reducing pain. With various types available, a dentist can recommend the most suitable splint based on individual needs. Proper care and regular dental consultations ensure that occlusal splints remain effective in maintaining oral health and enhancing overall well-being. Investing in an occlusal splint can lead to long-term benefits, making it a valuable addition to preventive dental care.

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