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Self Care Programs for TMJ and Jaw Pain

The jaw meets the upper skull in front of the ear, and the joint that connects them is called the **Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ)**. The initials refer to the joint itself, and not refer to a diagnosis.

Noises in the jaw joints are extremely common. In fact, an estimated 40% of the general population have disk displacements. Like most joint problems, they are slightly more common in women because the ligament structure in females is more flexible. As with any joint (hip, shoulder, wrist), the TMJ can be strained or injured. This type of injury can be the result of a specific trauma to the jaw area or can result from prolonged micro-trauma from oral habits.

Once a joint is strained, it can be easily re-injured (like a sprained ankle which is subsequently more prone to injury). Because we use the jaw for so many activities (talking, eating, yawning, laughing), this joint is constantly being moved. Therefore, TOTAL relaxation of the jaw joint and surrounding muscles is difficult. Holding the jaw muscles and joints in a relaxed position is, however, very manageable with practice. Regular attempts to relax the jaw muscles and avoidance of activities that would overwork the area, can help to reduce the pain and prevent additional strain to the area. The following suggestions can prove helpful:

Reduce Strain



Apply moist heat or cold and massage tender muscle and joints.

Heat or ice applications used up to 4 times per day can relax the muscles and reduce pain. For heat, microwave a wet towel for about 1 minute or until it is warm and wrap around a hot-water bottle or heated gel pack. Then apply for 15 to 20 minutes. For cold, hold ice wrapped in a thin cloth on the area until you first feel some numbness. Use what feels best.



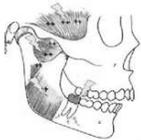
Eat a pain-free diet and chew your food on both sides.

Avoid hard foods, such as French bread or bagels. Avoid chewy food such as steak or candy. Cut fruits and vegetables into small pieces. Chewing on both sides will reduce strain. Do not chew gum!



Avoid events or activities that trigger the pain.

Use a pain diary to review daily activities that aggravate the pain and modify your behavior accordingly.



Avoid muscle tensing habits and activities that put strain on the jaw.

Notice if you have any of the oral habits listed below. Use reminders such as stickers or timers. If noticed, replace negative habits with positive habits such as the “n” tongue position.

- Teeth clenching and grinding (bruxism)
- Touching or resting the teeth together
- Biting cheeks, lips, or tongue
- Hard chewy foods and biting objects
- Resting your jaw on your hand
- Pushing the tongue against the teeth
- Tensing your jaw or pushing it forward or to the side
- Jaw strain from musical instrument or scuba
- Opening mouth too wide (yawning, *prolonged* dental treatment)
- Prolonged dental visits with the mouth open



Practice General Relaxation & Abdominal Breathing

This helps reduce your reactions to stressful life events and decrease tension in the jaw and oral habits such as clenching and grinding your teeth. Yoga and meditation are also great ways to relax.



Good Posture

Keep your tongue up, teeth apart and jaw muscles relaxed.

Closely monitor your jaw position during the day (waking hours) so that you maintain your jaw in a relaxed, comfortable position. This often involves placing your tongue lightly on the palate behind your upper front teeth (find this position by saying “n”). This allows your teeth to come apart while relaxing the jaw.



Progressive Stretching

Stretch the neck and shoulder muscle joints.

Place two to three fingers between your front teeth and count silently to 20. Rest and repeat 6 times. Gradually increase the range of motion.



Other Tips to Encourage Healing

Get a good night's sleep

Improve sleep environment by reducing light and noise. Get a comfortable mattress and pillow. Reduce stimulating activities in the late evening such as computer work, videos and exercising. Avoid sleeping on your stomach as this puts adverse force on the jaw and neck muscles.



Avoid Caffeine

Caffeine is a ‘muscle contractor’ drug and can make our muscles tighter. Caffeine or caffeine-like drugs can be found in coffee, tea, soda and chocolate. Decaffeinated coffee has half as much caffeine as regular.



Use anti-inflammatory and pain-reducing medications

Short-term use of over-the-counter ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen (Aleve), acetaminophen (Tylenol) and aspirin (without caffeine), can reduce joint and muscle pain. Consider using a combination of analgesic and muscle relaxant in the evening.

It is important to recognize that this is NOT a life-threatening situation, even though it may be very uncomfortable. Injury to the TMJ and jaw muscles is extremely common, and joint noises (clicks and pops) and locking of the jaw are also common. Most often these symptoms will improve over time. Changing habits, relaxing the area and avoiding additional strain or injury will speed up your recovery.

Post-Op Period

Any follow up appointments or adjustments to your TMJ orthotic device (occlusal or night guard) will be done at no charge to you for **three months** from the date of delivery. **After this period, office visits will incur an additional charge.**