



Self-Care Program for TMJ and Jaw Pain

The jaw meets the upper skull in front of the ear; the joint that connects them is called the temporomandibular joint (TMJ). The initials refer to the joint itself, and do not refer to a diagnosis. (Everyone has two “TMJs” but no one has “TMJ.”)

Noises in the jaw joints are extremely common, and disk displacements are estimated to be present in approximately 40% of the general population. Like most joint problems, they are slightly more common in women because the ligament structure in women is more flexible. Like any joint (hip, shoulder, wrist), the TMJ can be strained or injured. The injury can be the result of a specific trauma to the jaw area or can result from prolonged microtrauma 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), the 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, will be helpful to reduce the pain and prevent additional strain to the area. The following suggestions will help:

1. Apply moist heat for 15 minutes, two to four times each day to the painful area (microwave a wet towel for approximately one minute or until the towel is very warm...you can also wrap this moist hot towel around a hot water bottle to keep it warm longer). Or, try using ice wrapped in a thin washcloth for 10 minutes, two to four times each day (keep ice on the painful area only until you first feel some numbness). Heat or ice can reduce joint or muscle pain and relax the muscles.
2. Eat a softer diet. Avoid hard foods, such as French bread or bagels. Avoid chewy foods, such as steak or candy. Steam vegetables, and cut fruits and vegetables into small pieces. Chew with your back teeth, rather than biting with your front teeth. DO NOT CHEW GUM.
3. Chew your food on both sides at the same time or alternate sides, to reduce strain on one side.
4. TONGUE UP AND TEETH APART – The teeth should never be touching (except occasionally they touch lightly with swallowing). We suggest that you closely monitor your jaw position during the day (waking hours) so that you maintain your jaw in a relaxed, comfortable position. This involves placing the tongue lightly on the top of your mouth behind your upper front teeth, allowing the teeth to come apart and relaxing the jaw muscles.
5. Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a “muscle contracture” drug and can make your muscles tighter. Caffeine or caffeine-like drugs are in coffee, tea, soda and chocolate. Decaffeinated coffee has half as much caffeine as regular.

6. Avoid oral habits that put strain on the jaw muscles and joints. These include teeth clenching; teeth grinding (bruxism); teeth touching or resting together; biting cheeks, tongue or lip; biting pens, pencils or other objects; gum chewing; pushing the tongue against the teeth; jaw tensing or other habits.
7. Avoid resting your jaw on your hand.
8. Avoid activities which involve wide opening of the jaw (yawning, prolonged dental treatments, etc.) for a period of time until the pain has been reduced.
9. Avoid stomach sleeping, since this puts adverse forces on the jaw and neck muscles.
10. Use anti-inflammatory and pain-reducing medications like Ibuprofen or Tylenol + aspirin (without caffeine), 2 tablets every 6 hours, to reduce joint and muscle pain.

****RECOGNIZE THAT THIS IS NOT A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION, EVEN THOUGH IT CAN BE VERY UNCOMFORTABLE. INJURY TO THE TMJ AND JAW MUSCLES IS EXTREMELY COMMON, AND JOINT NOISES (CLICKS, POPS) 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 CONSIDERABLY.**