

## Treating Your Jaw

In order for your jaw problem (temporomandibular disorder) to improve the jaw requires a period of rest. The following recommendations are important to create the conditions that will allow the jaw muscles and joints to recover. This usually requires a change of habits and behavior on a day-to-day basis. This is part of the treatment as there is no medicine or treatment procedure that cures the problem. It is unlikely that you will experience improvement without addressing potential sources of strain on the jaw.

### 1. Become aware of your daily habits and jaw use patterns.

The top and bottom teeth make contact during eating and swallowing, but should not touch other times. When the jaw is not working during eating, swallowing, yawning and talking, the teeth should be apart and the jaw should be at rest.

- Notice any contact your teeth make.
- Notice any positions your jaw continually returns to.
- Notice any clenching, grinding, gritting, tapping of teeth or tensing of jaw muscles.
- Be aware of whether you are able to chew on either side<sup>3</sup> of the jaw.
- Notice when tooth contacts occur or the jaw muscles are tense such as during driving, studying, reading, social situations, conversation, stress, emotional upset, work, sports.



### 2. Position the jaw to avoid tooth contact.

Place the tip of the tongue just behind the top front teeth and keep the teeth slightly apart. Maintain this position whenever the jaw is not being used.



### 3. Change what & how you eat.

Softer foods place less stress on the jaw muscles and joints. Avoid eating hard foods such as whole apples or thick sandwiches that require opening wide and biting with the front teeth. Cut foods into small pieces and eat them on the back teeth.

Do not chew gum or sticky soft foods that require excessive jaw movements.

During the treatment period, do not return to chewing hard or chewy foods as soon as the jaw starts to feel better. The jaw will still need recovery time before you return to a normal chewing diet.

#### **4. Avoid wide jaw openings.**

Excessive movements of the jaw will place stress on the joint and the muscles.



#### **5. DO NOT TEST THE JAW.**

You may feel the need to periodically check whether you are making progress and see if the soreness is resolving. This usually requires moving the jaw beyond the comfortable range or eating harder foods. When you move your jaw to the point where you produce pain and discomfort, you have added to the stress on your muscles and joints. This can perpetuate the problem you are trying to eliminate.

#### **6. Delay dental treatments.**

Avoid any dental treatment not related to active tooth decay and gum disease until your jaw symptoms are under reasonable control. Wide mouth opening required for dental procedures is a significant stress on the jaw. This includes dental cleaning. Discuss this with your dentist and notify your specialist if you are planning a routine dental treatment.

#### **7. Change your sleep habits.**

Sleep on your back. Sleeping on your stomach puts considerable pressure on the jaw. Propping pillows beside you will help avoid unconscious movements onto your stomach.



Avoid sleeping positions where the jaw is resting on a hand or arm. This position also applies a lot of pressure to the jaw.

#### **8. Support your jaw while yawning.**

Place the index finger and thumb or back of the hand under your chin to provide extra stability to the lower jaw during yawning.

## 9. Avoid leaning on your chin or jaw at any time.

Avoid cradling the phone with your shoulder to free up the hands.

There may be other factors contributing to jaw dysfunction. This guide may have overlooked something that is contributing to the problem. Please report anything that you think may be contributing. Your ideas are important.



## 10. Apply heat or cold

Jaw muscles and joint problems generally respond to heat applications. But, in some instances people find cold applications more soothing. Start by applying heat. Then try the cold application if heat is not helpful.

### Heat:



- Heat the area of the face around your cheek, jaw and the temple. These are the locations of key jaw muscles.
- Moist heat is considered more penetrating. Heat packs found in medical supply stores, hot water bottles, or towels heated in hot water can be used.
- Apply heat at least two times each day for 10 to 20 minutes.

### Cold:



- Cold application can be helpful especially after new or an additional injury to a jaw muscle or joint.
- A cold gel pack, bag of frozen peas, or plastic bag filled with ice and wrapped with a kitchen towel can be used.
- Apply cold to the sore area for 10 to 15 minutes 3 times a day every 2 hours for two days after a recent injury.

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