



SELF-CARE THERAPIES

The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is the jaw joint just in front of both ears. Individuals with pain in the head and neck areas should have a thorough examination to identify the source of pain, which may be from the TMJs, muscles, nerves or other associated structures.

TMJ noises are very common in the general population. As in any joint (wrist, hip, knee), the TMJs or muscles in the jaw can be strained or injured, often caused by overuse of these areas.

The jaw system is used for numerous activities (talking, eating, yawning, laughing, swallowing, etc.) and when it is not engaged in these activities it should be allowed to rest. The joints and muscles are involved in so many activities it is difficult to allow for this rest period and achieve healing. Healing of the TMJs, muscles and ligaments can take many months. Frequently, humans develop activities (clenching the teeth, fingernail biting, gum chewing) that are not part of the usual functional activities of the jaw, placing additional stress on the system and preventing a sufficient resting/healing period. Regular attempts to rest the system help to reduce strain and discomfort. The following suggestions are designed to reduce injury and discomfort and promote healing.

1. Apply heat to the area of discomfort 2-4 times per day for 10-20 minutes each time. Do not exceed 20 minutes at any session as excessive heat may result in swelling. A microwave gel-pack, water bottle, heating pad or moist heated hand towel are all acceptable. Some individuals find ice more beneficial than heat and others alternate with heat and ice. Experiment and try them all. When using ice there may be an initial burning sensation as the skin becomes cold, this is normal. Apply the ice only until numbness is sensed, then remove the ice. Use a thin towel or ice pack, do not place ice directly to the skin.
2. **EAT A PAIN-FREE DIET.** Avoid hard or chewy foods such as bagels, gum, caramels, raw carrots, hard breads, steak and candy. Blended foods, cutting fruits into small pieces and steaming vegetables are all helpful. Chew with the back teeth and avoid opening wide and biting into large portions of food (apples, large sandwiches). The key is not to cause pain when eating. Also, do not stay on a soft diet for extended periods, periodically increase the firmness of the diet as tolerated.
3. Chew food on both sides at the same time to reduce the strain on one side. This will seem awkward initially, but manageable with practice. At the very least, alternate chewing on the left and right sides.
4. **TEETH APART AND JAW MUSCLES RELAXED:**
The teeth should only touch when chewing and swallowing (about 2-10 minutes per day). The remainder of the time the teeth should never touch, not even resting together lightly. The jaw position should be relaxed and comfortable. Some individuals prefer to have the tongue resting in the floor of the mouth just behind the lower front teeth and others prefer to have the tip of the tongue resting lightly on the roof of the mouth or on the back of the upper front teeth (as in speaking the letter “n”). Either position is acceptable, but do not allow the tongue to press firmly against the palate with suction in the mouth. Some individuals inadvertently stay in this tense, braced position (tongue against palate) for much of the day causing undue stress on the muscles.

5. Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a “muscle tensing” drug. Even a small amount of caffeine causes muscles to be stressed, tired and unable to respond to the normal needs placed on them. Caffeine is the most widely used stimulant in our society and is in many pain medications, coffee, tea, soda, chocolate, diet aids, stay-awake drugs and numerous other medications and foods. Even many “decaffeinated” coffees contain caffeine, about ½ the level as regular coffee. Also, regular use of caffeine (as little as 1-2 cups of coffee per day) may lead to persistent headaches, sleep disturbances, increased heart rate and high blood pressure. One mistake people make in trying to quit caffeine is to stop all at once. All at once may cause a severe prolonged headache. Eliminate caffeine gradually by eliminating one drink per week. For example, if you drink six caffeinated drinks per day, the first week switch one of the caffeine drinks to a non-caffeine drink (water, juice, non-caffeine soda, etc.), the next week switch one more drink and continue until caffeine is completely eliminated.
6. Monitor for and avoid habits/activities that add strain to joints and muscles (clenching or grinding the teeth, biting the lips/cheeks, chewing on pens, pencils, toothpicks, biting fingernails, pushing the tongue against the teeth, holding the jaw tense). DO NOT CHEW GUM.
7. Avoid stress on the jaw. Do not lean on the jaw. When yawning support the jaw with a hand under the chin to avoid over-stretching. Prolonged dental appointments with the mouth open wide should be avoided, if possible, until the pain has been reduced or eliminated. When having dental treatment ask for frequent breaks to allow the jaw to rest.
8. Sleep posture is very important. Avoid positions that strain the jaw and/or neck, such as stomach sleeping. This places pressure on the jaw and neck muscles and jaw joints for many hours. When sleeping on the side, position the pillow as not to push on the mandible (lower jaw) and maintain neck (cervical) alignment.
9. Proper diet, exercise, rest, vitamin D and Calcium are all important for the health and healing of the jaw joints and muscles. It is recommended to get up to 900-1200mg of Calcium each day. One glass of milk is about 300-400mg and other foods such as yogurt, cheese and vegetables contain calcium.
10. Use anti-inflammatory and pain reducing medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin), Tylenol, and aspirin (without caffeine), per a doctor’s recommendations, to subdue discomfort and inflammation. Over-use of these medications frequently leads to headache disorders, as does regular caffeine use.
11. RELAX: It is very important to relax the body’s muscles and joints throughout the day. Patients benefit from sitting in a quiet room, listening to soothing music, a warm bath/shower and slow deep breathing. These techniques also can be used during driving, working, studying or during nearly any activity. Simply allow muscle tension to fade, breathe easy and relax.

Recognize that this is not a life-threatening situation, though it can be very uncomfortable. Discomfort of the jaw joints and muscles is extremely common, and locking of the jaw is not uncommon. Most often these symptoms will improve over time by following your doctor’s directions. Changing habits, relaxing the jaw and neck, avoiding additional strain or injury, and following the above instructions should speed the recovery considerably.

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