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Self-care Program for Temporomandibular Disorders (TMD)

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. People with jaw problems can have problems in their TMJ(s) and/or the muscles of their jaw. Your doctor can determine your specific Temporomandibular Disorder (TMD).

Noises in the TMJ are common in the general population. Like any joint, (hip, shoulder, and wrist), the TMJ or muscles in your jaw can be strained or injured. The injury can be the result of a specific trauma to the jaw or can result from prolonged low level trauma from oral habits. There may be other causes for jaw problems as well.

Once a joint or muscle is strained, it can be easily re-injured. This is because we use the jaw for so many activities (talking, eating, yawning) the joint and muscles are constantly moving. This makes total relaxation of the jaw joint and muscles very difficult. However, with some practice, you should be able to get the jaw muscles and joints in to a manageable and relaxed position. Regular attempts to relax the jaw muscles and avoidance of activities that would overwork the area will be helpful in reducing pain and preventing additional strain to the area.

Following these suggestions should help:

1: Apply moist heat for 15-20 minutes, 2-4 times a day to the painful area. Microwave a gel pack and a wet towel until they are very warm. Wrap the towel around the gel pack and place it on both sides of the jaw or treat both sides separately. The heat should be very warm, but comfortable. Some people respond better to cold treatments. Try using ice wrapped in a thin cloth for 5-10 minutes, 2-4 times a day. Or experiment using both cold and heat.

2: Eat a pain-free diet. Avoid hard foods, like French bread or bagels. Also avoid chewy foods, like steak. Cut fruits into small pieces and steam veggies. Cut up food with a fork and knife if biting into food hurts. Chew with your back teeth. If even “soft” foods cause pain, put any food you like into a

blender and start on grind. Blend the food to the chewiest consistency that does not cause pain or locking in your jaw. Do not stay on a soft diet too long. Periodically increase the consistency as tolerated. Discuss the details of your diet with your doctor.

Chew food on both sides at the same time to reduce strain on one side. Specifically, cut food into its normal size and then cut that piece in half. Then put one piece on each side of your mouth and chew. This takes practice!

3: Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a “muscle tensing” drug. Caffeine is in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate and some aspirins. Decaffeinated coffee usually has half as much caffeine as regular.

Avoid oral habits that put strain on the jaw muscles and joints. These include teeth clenching, grinding, touching or holding the teeth together, biting cheeks/lips and biting on objects like pens. DO NOT CHEW GUM.

4: Avoid resting your jaw on your hand.

5: Avoid activities which involve wide opening of the jaw. Prolonged dental treatments with the mouth open should be avoided until the pain has been reduced or eliminated.

6: Avoid stomach sleeping because it places strain on the jaw and neck muscles. Sleeping on your back is best.

7: Use anti-inflammatory and pain reducing medications like Ibuprofen, Tylenol and aspirin (without caffeine) to reduce joint and muscle pain. Consult with your doctor.

8: Calcium is very important for healing and the health of your TMJ and jaw muscles.

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 locking of the jaw is not uncommon. Most often these symptoms will improve with time. Changing habits, relaxing the area, and avoiding additional strain in combination with the above suggestions should speed up your recovery considerably.