

## **Self-Care and Therapy for the Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ)**

The jaw meets the upper skull near the front of the ear. The joint that connects the jaw to the skull 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”). People who have problems with the jaw joint are said to have a specific temporomandibular disorder (TMD).

Noises in the TMJ are common in the general population. Joint problems, involving the TMJ, are slightly more common in women than men. Like any joint, (hip, shoulder, and wrist), the TMJ or muscles that support it can become 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.

Once a joint or muscle is strained, it can easily be re-injured. Think of a sprained ankle which is subsequently more prone to injury. Since the jaw is used for so many activities including talking, eating, yawning and laughing, the joint and surrounding muscles are constantly moving. Therefore, achieving total relaxation of the jaw joint and surrounding muscles is difficult. However, allowing the jaw muscles and joints to be in a relaxed position is 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 pain and prevent additional strain to the area.

### **Suggestions to reduce pain and prevent addition strain to TMJ and surrounding muscles:**

1. **Apply moist heat for 15-20 minutes two to four times each day to the painful area.** For example, microwave a gel pack or hot water bottle and a wet towel until they are very warm. Wrap the towel around the gel pack/hot water bottle then apply it to both sides of your jaw at the joint and under the chin. Treat one side and then switch to the other. This heat treatment should feel very warm but comfortable. Some people respond better to cold treatments. If this is the case for you, try using ice wrapped in a very thin cloth (or no cloth) for 5-10 minutes two to four times a day over any painful areas. The ice may initially give you a “burning” sensation – this is normal. Keep the ice on the painful area only until you first feel some numbness, then remove it. Heat or ice can reduce joint or muscle pains and relax the muscles. You may also find that cold followed with heat is useful. Experiment to find what feels best for you.
2. **Eat a PAIN-FREE diet.** Avoid hard foods, such as French bread or bagels. Avoid chewy foods, such as steak or candy. Cut fruits into small pieces and steam vegetables. Cut up food with a fork and knife if biting into foods hurts. Chew with your back teeth. Eat anything you want as long as it does not cause pain or locking in your jaw. If “soft” foods cause pain, put any food you like in 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 by periodically increasing the consistency of your diet as tolerated. Discuss the details of your diet with Dr. Jim or Dr. Kelly periodically.
3. **Chew your food on both sides of your mouth** at the same time to reduce strain on one side of your jaw. Specifically, cut your food into its normal size and cut that piece in half. Then place a piece on each side of your mouth and chew. This will take practice but will balance your chewing and help eliminate one sided jaw pain.

4. **Tongue Up, Teeth Apart and Jaw Muscles Relaxed.** Your teeth should not be touching/resting together except when they occasionally lightly touch while swallowing. We suggest that you closely monitor your jaw position during your 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 wherever it is most comfortable while allowing the teeth to come apart, and relaxing the jaw muscles. Often putting your tongue gently on the top of your mouth where you softly say “n” is a comfortable position.
5. **Avoid Caffeine.** Caffeine is a “muscle tensing” drug and can make your muscles feel tighter. Caffeine and caffeine-like drugs are found in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate and some aspirins. Decaffeinated coffee typically has half as much caffeine as regular coffee.
6. **Avoid oral habits that put strain on the jaw muscles and joints.** These include teeth clenching, teeth grinding, touching or holding the teeth gently together, biting cheeks/lips, pushing your tongue against teeth or jaw muscle tensing. Also avoid biting on objects like pens and pencils. **DO NOT CHEW GUM.** We have the ability to make removable appliances that help lessen pain and tooth damage related to grinding and clenching. Ask Dr. Jim or Dr. Kelly if you have any questions about these appliances and your situation.
7. **Avoid resting your jaw on your hand.**
8. **Avoid activities which involve wide opening of the jaw** such as yawning. When you feel like yawning, put the tip of your tongue hard against the top of your mouth and let your mouth open as far as it can without letting your tongue off the top of your mouth. You can also put your hand under your jaw to limit the opening. Prolonged dental treatments with your mouth open should be avoided, if possible, until the pain has been reduced or eliminated. If you need more significant dental work, let us know about any jaw pain you may have before and during treatment. There are steps we can take to reduce or eliminate this discomfort.
9. **Avoid stomach sleeping** since this puts strain on the jaw and neck muscles. Sleeping on your side is ok as long as you do not put a force on your jaw. Sleeping on your back is best.
10. **Use anti-inflammatory and pain reducing medications** like ibuprofen (Advil), Tylenol, and aspirin (without caffeine) to reduce joint and muscle pain if needed. Ibuprofens and aspirins have both anti-inflammatory and pain reducing actions, where Tylenol is not an anti-inflammatory but works well as a pain reducer. Ask Dr. Jim or Dr. Kelly for further recommendation on the use of these drugs if you have any questions.
11. **Get enough Calcium.** Calcium is very important for the healing and health of your TMJ and jaw muscles. Calcium comes in many sources including dairy products and certain vegetables. Supplements can be used in the 1200 mg. per day range.

**\*\*Please remember that although it can be very uncomfortable, this is not a life-threatening situation. Injury to the TMJ and jaw muscles is extremely common and locking of the jaw is not uncommon. Most often these symptoms will improve over time. Changing habits, relaxing the area, avoiding additional strain or injury and following the recommendations listed above should speed up your recovery considerably.**