

Managing your overworked jaw system

This information sheet has been given to you by your dentist because there is a concern that you are overworking and possibly damaging your teeth, jaw joint, or the muscles you use to chew.

When the temporomandibular joint and the muscles that surround it are overworked, the resulting strain on the jaw system can cause pain in the joint between the upper and lower jaws and in the muscles you use to move the jaw. The main solution to the problem is to find the activity that is overworking the system and eliminate it. There are many ways to stress the jaw system, and there are many ways to relieve it.

We have given you the following information to guide you in finding the combination of techniques which will help reduce overworking of your own jaw system. Since every person is different, your solution will be unique to you. It is possible that this guide has overlooked a factor that is important in your problem. Please advise us of anything that you think may be contributing. Your input is important.

› **Become aware of habits of jaw use patterns.**

Notice if your jaw muscles are tender or tired in the morning or at the end of the day. This will give you information about whether you are overworking your jaw during the day or while you are sleeping.

Notice any contact your teeth make.

Notice any positions your jaw continually returns to.

Notice any clenching, grinding, gritting, or tapping of teeth.

Notice any clenching or tensing of the muscles that control your jaw movement.

Notice when these tooth contacts or jaw muscle tensing most often occur. This can include driving, studying, reading, working, social situations, conversations, fatigue, overwork, stress, emotional upsets, sports.

Notice whether you are able to eat on both sides of your mouth.

› **Position the jaw to avoid tooth contacting habits.**

The teeth should make contact only during chewing and swallowing. Try to rest the jaw by leaving the teeth slightly apart when you are not talking, chewing, or swallowing. It may help to place the tip of the tongue just behind the top front teeth and keep the teeth slightly apart.

› **Diet Modifications.**

Soft foods place less stress on the jaw muscles and joints than coarse foods.

Avoid eating foods that require you to open wide and bite into them with the front teeth, such as apples or sandwiches. Cut these foods into small pieces and chew them with your back teeth.

Avoid chewing gum or chewy foods that require excessive jaw movements.

> Avoid wide jaw openings.

Support the jaw during yawning by placing your index finger and thumb under your chin. Excessive movements of the jaw will place stress on the joint and the muscles.

> DO NOT test the jaw!

You may want to periodically move your jaw around to check whether you are making progress and the soreness is resolving. To do this, people usually open wide and swing the jaw from side to side beyond the comfortable range of motion. Unfortunately, this damages the joint and surrounding structures and can cause a continuation of the problems you are trying to eliminate.

> Sleep Patterns.

Avoid sleeping in a position that will place stress on the jaw. This includes sleeping on your stomach, or with your jaw resting on your hand or arm. It may be helpful to prop pillows beside you to prevent your moving to a harmful position while you are asleep.

> Avoid posture that places pressure on the jaw.

Avoid leaning on your chin or jaw at any time. This even applies to posturing your head to press a telephone against your shoulder.

> Apply moist heat to the muscles around the jaw joint when you have muscle pain in the area.

At least twice a day, 10 minutes per time: Place two towels in hot water. Squeeze excess moisture from one towel and wrap it under the chin on both sides of the face extending up towards the temples. When this towel loses its heat, place it back in the hot water and switch to the other towel.

OR to use a hot water bottle instead of alternating towels: use enough hot water to allow flexible placement of the hot water bottle around the head. Squeeze out any air to ensure best heat transfer. Wrap the hot water bottle in a moist towel. Place the hot water bottle wrapped in the moist towel against one side of the face extending from the chin up to the temple. Alternate to the other side after 10 minutes (or as long as 20 minutes if this is possible).

> Massage the muscles of the jaw system.

See a massage therapist or physiotherapist or chiropractor for treatment of acute episodes of muscle spasms, and for instruction in how to massage the muscles of the jaw system at home.

> Consider a Bruxism (“night guard”) appliance.

Some patients find that symptoms are reduced/relieved when a night guard is used, especially when it is known that the patient is clenching and/or grinding while sleeping. Speak to your dentist for more information.

> General Recommendations.

Get adequate sleep.

Maintain good nutrition.

Learn relaxation skills that will help you deal with stress.

When you find yourself doing something that is harmful to your jaw, simply notice it and stop yourself.