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TMJ and Jaw Pain self-management

We use our mouths for many activities: talking, yawning, eating, and laughing. When we are not engaged in these, we need to allow our jaw muscles and joints to relax sufficiently. The steps listed below will help you learn how to relax these muscles and joints, and reduce the jaw pain that you are experiencing.

- Use hot or cold packs. Apply moist heat, ice, or a combination of the two to the painful area. Most people prefer heat, but if that increases your pain, use either the combination or the ice alone.
 - Apply moist heat for 20 minutes two to four times each day. Wet a towel with very warm water, keeping it warm by wrapping it around a hot water bottle or placing a piece of plastic wrap and a heating pad over it. The towel can also be rewarmed in a microwave oven or under very warm tap water.
 - Use the combination of heat and ice two to four times a day. Apply the heat as recommended above for 10 minutes, then lightly brush the painful area with an ice cube wrapped in a thin washcloth. Repeat this sequence four or five times.
 - Apply ice wrapped in a thin washcloth to the painful area until you begin to feel some numbness (usually about 10 minutes,) then remove it.
- Eat soft foods. Confine your diet to soft foods such as casseroles, canned fruit, soups, eggs, and yogurt. Do not chew gum or eat hard foods (such as raw carrots) or chewy foods (such as caramels, steaks, or bagels.) Cut other food into small pieces, and chew on both sides of your mouth to reduce the strain on one side.
- Rest your jaw muscles. Keep your teeth apart and practice good posture.
 - When you are not chewing, your teeth should never touch (except occasionally when you swallow.) Closely monitor your jaw position for signs of clenching. Try placing your tongue lightly on the top of your mouth behind your upper front teeth, allowing the teeth to come apart and relaxing the jaw muscles.
 - Good head, neck, and back posture help you to maintain good jaw posture. Try to hold your head up straight, and use a small pillow or rolled towel to support your lower back. Avoid habits such as resting your jaw on your hand or cradling the telephone against your shoulder.
- Avoid caffeine. Caffeine stimulates your muscles to contract, and therefore, become more tense. Caffeine, or caffeine-like drugs are in coffee, tea, most sodas, and chocolate. Decaffeinated coffee also has some caffeine.
- Watch your habits. Avoid oral habits that put strain on the jaw muscles and joints. These include, among others: clenching the teeth; grinding the teeth (bruxism); touching or resting the teeth together; biting your cheeks, lips, or objects put in your mouth; pushing the tongue against the teeth; or tensing the jaw.
- Sleep smart. Avoid sleeping habits that strain your muscles or joints. Don't sleep on your stomach. If you sleep on your side, keep your neck and jaw aligned.
- Don't open wide. Until the pain has been reduced, avoid activities that involve opening the jaw wide – yawning, yelling, and prolonged dental treatments.
- Use medications. Use anti-inflammatory and pain-reducing medications like Naproxen Sodium (Aleve,) Acetaminophen (Tylenol,) Ibuprofen (Advil,) Aspirin, and percogestic to reduce joint and muscle pain. Avoid medications with caffeine, such as Anacin, Excedrin, and Vanquish.