

Physical Therapy for Jaw Pain (TMD)

Disorders in the jaw joints and muscles can be uncomfortable and make speaking and chewing difficult. Often this can be caused by accidents, surgery, developmental jaw defects, oral habits, recent dental restorations, mismatched bite, orthodontics, stress, and the clenching and grinding of teeth. Frequent symptoms include headaches, pain when opening, limited ability to open all the way, sensitive teeth and cracked teeth.

Listed below are some strategies to combat these problems:

- Try to catch yourself clenching or grinding your teeth during the day. Many patients find that they have this habit and never even knew it.
- Ask your partner if they have ever observed you clenching or grinding your teeth at night. While you sleep, your teeth can grind together very quickly, similar to the REM eye movement pattern. In this way, several weeks of wear can happen overnight.
- Try to set a cut off time before going to bed for dealing with and thinking about stressful problems, typically 1-2 hours before bedtime. Keep a pad of paper nearby to write down things that pop into your head that you will deal with the next day.

Here are some exercises that can help keep your jaw muscles limber to discourage clenching, as well as regain lost range of motion in opening. Sometimes it helps to apply a heating pad, warm washcloth, or hot water bottle to your jaw muscles first in order to help relax them:

- Place a closed fist under your chin to resist movement gently. Open and close mouth 30 times.
- Next place your fist on the front of your chin. Move your lower jaw forward and backward gently 30 times.
- Repeat this process by alternately putting your fist on the side of your jaw and gently apply opposite pressure with your lower jaw to help stretch the muscles. Stretch the left and right sides going both directions.

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Medication:

The most effective medication to combat jaw related disorders is 200 mg – 800mg of ibuprofen (Advil) every 4-6 hours as needed for pain. The anti-inflammatory effect of this medication helps reduce the source of the problem. Occasionally, we will prescribe a patient a mild muscle relaxant to help things start healing. There can be some unpleasant side effects, however, that limit this use.

Nightguard or Splint:

Many patients find relief by wearing a plastic bite splint which helps to take some of the pressure off of the jaws, as well as protect the teeth against excessive wear. There are several over the counter brands of the “boil and bite” variety that can be purchased at local stores that are reasonably priced. For several reasons, most patients require a custom made nightguard made in a dental office. Often these can be more comfortable and not feel as bulky.

For many patients who suffer from extreme headaches, we can make a similar device called an NTI. More information regarding this can be found at www.nti-tss.com.

Physical Therapy:

Many patients find that having a physical therapist massage periodically massage the jaw joints and muscles provides them relief. We can recommend Deidre Vandenbos for this. She can be contacted at 770-984-8889 or www.smit-atl.com.

As always, feel free to contact us with any further questions or concerns that you may have.

Drs. Waldron and Schlissel
3020 Roswell Road Suite 100
Marietta, GA 30062
770-977-5547
www.waldrondentistry.com