

Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) Disorders

Noises in the jaw joint, the TMJ, are extremely common in the general population. Joint problems, involving the TMJ, are slightly more common in women than men. Like any joint, such as the hip, shoulder, or wrist, the TMJ 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 microtrauma from oral habits. There are also other causes for jaw problems as well.

Once a joint or muscle is strained, it can be easily re-injured (like a sprained ankle which is subsequently more prone to injury). Because we use the jaw for so many activities (talking, eating, yawning, and laughing), the joint and the muscles are constantly moving. Therefore, total relaxation of the jaw joint and surrounding muscles is difficult. Holding the jaw muscles and joints in a relaxed position is, however, 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. The following suggestions should help:

1. Apply moist heat for 15-20 minute 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 and put it on both sides of your jaw going under your chin, or to one side and then the other side of your jaw. This should feel very warm but comfortable. Also, try using ice wrapped in a very thin cloth (or no cloth) for 5-10 minutes two to four times each day. 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 relaxes the muscles. You may also find that cold followed with heat is useful. Experiment.
2. Eat a pain-free diet. Avoid hard foods, such as French bread or bagels. Avoid chewy foods, such as steak or candy. Cut fruit into small pieces and steam vegetables. Chew with your back teeth rather than biting with your front teeth.
3. Chew your food on both sides at the same time to reduce strain on one side.
4. Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a muscle tensing drug that can make your muscles feel tighter. Caffeine or caffeine-like drugs are in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate and some aspirins. Decaffeinated coffee typically has half as much caffeine as regular coffee.
5. 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 objects like pens or pencils. **DO NOT CHEW GUM.**

6. Avoid resting your jaw on your hand.
7. When you feel like yawning, put 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.
8. 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 the best.

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 over time. Changing habits, relaxing the area, avoiding additional strain or injury and doing the above should speed up your recovery considerably.