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Self Care for Temporomandibular Disorders

Apply moist heat or cold to tender muscle and joints.

Heat or ice applications used up to four times per day can relax the muscles and reduce pain. For heat, microwave a wet towel for approximately one minute or until towel is warm and wrap around a hot-water bottle or heated gel pack and apply for 15 to 20 minutes. For cold, use ice wrapped in a thin cloth on the area until you first feel some numbness. Use what feels best, but in general, heat is used for more chronic pain conditions and cold for acute conditions.

Eat a pain-free diet and chew your food on both sides.

Avoid hard foods such as French bread or bagels. Avoid chewy food such as steak or candy. Cut fruits and vegetables into small pieces. Chewing on both sides will reduce strain. If biting into food with your front teeth is painful, cut up your food and chew with your back teeth. Do not chew gum.

Avoid even or activities that trigger the pain.

Keep a pain diary to review daily activities that aggravate the pain and modify your behavior accordingly.

Keep your tongue up, teeth apart, and jaw muscles relaxed.

Closely monitor your jaw position during the day (working hours) so that you maintain your jaw in a relaxed, comfortable position. This often involves placing your tongue lightly on the palate behind your upper front teeth (find this position by saying “n”), allowing the teeth to be apart while relaxing the jaw.

Avoid muscle-tensing habits and activities that put strain on the jaw.

Remind yourself regularly to see if any of these oral habits are present with reminders such as stickers or timers. If noticed, these habits should be replaced with a positive habit such as the “n” tongue position.

- Clenching and grinding your teeth (bruxism).
- Touching or resting your teeth together.
- Biting cheeks, lips or tongue.
- Eating hard chewy foods and biting objects
- Resting your jaw on your hand.
- Straining the jaw when playing a musical instrument.
- Pushing the tongue against the teeth.
- Opening your mouth too wide or too long when yawning, singing or dental visits.
- Tensing your jaw or pushing your jaw forward or to the side.

Practice general relaxation and abdominal breathing.

This helps reduce your reactions to stressful life events and decrease tension on the jaw and oral habits such as clenching.

Get a good night's sleep.

Improve your sleep environment. Reduce light and noise and lie on a comfortable mattress. Reduce stimulating activities in the late evening, including computer work and exercise. Avoid sleeping on your stomach.

Avoid caffeine.

Caffeine can interfere with sleep and increase muscle tension. Caffeine or caffeine-like drugs are in coffee, tea, soda, power drinks, and chocolate. Note that some decaffeinated coffee has up to half as much caffeine as regular coffee.

Use anti-inflammatory and pain-reducing medications.

Short-term use of over-the-counter ibuprofen, naproxen or aspirin (without caffeine) can reduce joint and muscle pain. If available and compatible with your condition and lifestyle, consider using a combination of an analgesic and muscle relaxant in the evening.