Stretching your Jaw Muscles

People unconsciously stretch many of their muscles throughout the day. Patients who have jaw muscle stiffness or pain often find a significant improvement in their symptoms with this jaw stretching exercise. Your dentist believes your symptoms will improve if you perform this simple jaw stretching exercise six times a day, between thirty and sixty seconds each time, at the opening and duration you determine best for you.

It is best to warm your jaw muscles before you stretch by slowly opening and closing about ten times. You may also warm your muscles by applying moist heat to them (allow time for the heat to penetrate into your muscles). While stretching you need to concentrate on relaxing your lips, facial muscles and jaw. Do not bite your fingers while stretching, they are only to give you a guide for the width you are stretching.

You will need to determine what opening and duration are best for you. To determine this, the first time your stretch, bend your index finger and place the middle knuckle between your upper and lower front teeth (see Figure 1). Hold this position for thirty seconds. If this does not aggravate your symptoms, the second time you stretch, increase the time to forty-five seconds. If this does not aggravate your symptoms, the next time increase it to sixty seconds.

If this does not aggravate your symptoms, increase your opening width to two fingertips (see Figure 2) and cut your time back to thirty seconds. Continue increasing your time and opening in this manner, but do not go beyond three fingertips.
Find the largest opening and duration that does not cause even the slightest discomfort or aggravation of your symptoms and use this each time you stretch. If you experience any discomfort or aggravation, decrease your opening or time.

As your symptoms improve or if you have a flare-up, you will need to increase or decrease this opening and time. Be very careful not to cause yourself any aggravation with this exercise, because this may hurt your progress.

Patients report this exercise does not provide immediate symptom improvement but takes about one to two weeks before benefits are noticed. Similarly, stopping does not cause immediate loss of these benefits, but also tends to take one to two weeks to be noticed. With the normal symptom fluctuation most TMD patients experience, it is often difficult for them to related their symptom improvement or aggravation with the starting or stopping of this exercise.