Self-Care Therapies

We use our mouths for so many activities (talking, eating, yawning, laughing) and when we are not engaged in those, we need to allow our jaw muscles and joints to relax. Many people have developed habits that do not permit their muscles or joints a sufficient amount of time. The following will help instruct you on how to relax your jaw muscles to reduce the jaw pain you are having.

1. Apply moist heat, ice or a combination of heat and ice to the painful areas. Most people prefer heat but if that increases your pain, use the combination or just the ice.
   a. Use moist heat for twenty minutes two or four times each day. Moist heat can be obtained by wetting a towel with very warm water. It can be kept warm by wrapping it around a hot water bottle or placing a piece of plastic wrap and heating pad over it. It also can be rewarmed in a microwave oven or under the very warm water.
   b. Use the combination of heat and ice two to four times each day. Apply the heat as recommended above for ten minutes then lightly brush the painful area with an ice cube wrapped in a thin washcloth. Repeat this sequence four or five times.
   c. Apply ice wrapped in a thin washcloth to the painful area until you first feel some numbness then remove it (usually takes about ten minutes).
2. Eat soft foods like casseroles, canned fruit, soups, eggs and yogurt. Don’t chew gum or eat hard (raw carrots) or chewy foods (caramels, steak, bagels). Cut other food into small pieces, evenly divide the food on both sides of your mouth and chew on both sides.
3. Rest your jaw muscles by keeping your teeth apart and practicing good posture.
   a. Your teeth should never touch except lightly when you swallow. Closely monitor yourself for the habit of clenching that you may have developed. People will often do this when they are driving the car or concentrating. Try keeping your jaw relaxed by placing your tongue lightly behind your upper front teeth, having your jaw in a comfortable position with your teeth apart and relaxing your jaw muscles.
b. Good head, neck and back posture help you to have 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 as resting your jaw on your hand or cradling the telephone against your shoulder.

4. Avoid caffeine, because it stimulates your muscles to contract and hold more tension in them. Caffeine or caffeine-like drugs are in coffee, tea, most sodas, and chocolate. Decaffeinated coffee also has some caffeine, while Sanka has none.

5. Avoid habits that strain your jaw muscles or joints, such as clenching, grinding or resting your teeth together; biting your cheeks, lips, or objects you put in your mouth; pushing your tongue against your teeth or holding your jaw in an uncomfortable or tense position.

6. Avoid sleeping habits that strain your jaw muscles or joints, by not sleeping on your stomach and if you sleep on your side, keeping your neck and jaw aligned.

7. Restrain from opening your mouth wide, such as yawning, yelling, or prolonged dental procedures.

8. Use anti-inflammatory and pain reducing medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin) naproxen sodium (Aleve) ketoprofen (Orudis KT), acetaminophen (Tylenol), aspirin, and Percogesic to reduce joint and muscle pain. Avoid those with caffeine, i.e. Anacin, Excedrin, or Vanquish.

There is no “cure” for TMD and you may need to follow these instructions for the rest of your life. Your dentist may suggest other therapies in addition to these instructions. No single therapy has been shown to be totally effective for TMS and a percentage of patients receiving TMD therapies report no symptom improvement, i.e., ten to twenty percent of patients receiving occlusal splints report no improvement. Based on your symptoms and identified contributing factors, an individualized treatment approach will be recommended and it may be revised as your symptom response is observed.