TMJ Dysfunction – information and exercises

What is the TMJ?
The jaw is also known as the TMJ or Temporomandibular Joint. It can be painful as the result of injury, inflammatory disease, poor postures and habits, or growth disorders. This leaflet gives you advice on managing your jaw pain.

What are the signs and symptoms of TMJ dysfunction?
Pain is the most common symptom of TMJ problems, although not everyone gets pain. Symptoms can include:

- Pain in the jaw joints and facial muscles
- Clicking, grinding or locking of the jaw
- Headaches & dizziness
- Difficulty opening or closing the mouth comfortably
- Pain on talking, chewing (especially hard food) & yawning
- Ear pain, ringing in the ears (tinnitus) & hearing loss

What causes TMJ pain?
There are a number of causes and frequently it is a combination of these rather than one single cause:

- Trauma, for example a blow to the jaw either directly to the joint or elsewhere on the jaw
- Overactivity of the jaw muscles. This can occur from continuous clenching or grinding the teeth
- Wear and tear of the cartilage inside in the joint
- Arthritis
- Increased sensitivity to pain linked to stress

Advice

- Apply heat or ice for 15-20 minutes on the area of pain
- Painkillers – an anti-inflammatory is best
- Massage the joint and surrounding muscles

DO:

- Exercise your jaw regularly on your dentist's advice
- Be aware when you are clenching or grinding your teeth
- Change to a soft food diet and avoid hard and chewy foods
- Cut tough food into small pieces

AVOID:

- Excessive chewing (e.g. nails, gum, pen tops & your cheek). This stops the jaw from having a rest
- Excessive mouth opening (e.g. yawning)
- Resting your jaw in your hand or holding your telephone to your ear using just your shoulders
- Sleeping face down, as this puts a strain on the neck

Posture Correction

Bad posture in sitting or lying causes prolonged over-stretching of the ligaments and surrounding tissues including those of the jaw. By learning to keep a good posture, it is possible to prevent or relieve your neck and jaw pain.

Exercises

1. Sit comfortably in a high-backed chair with your head back against the head rest, and your mouth lightly closed. Place the web of your thumb and forefinger against the front of the lower jaw, outside of your mouth.

Using your hand press on your chin, gently forcing your lower jaw backwards, and your head into the rest, neither allowing your skull or neck to flex nor extend, and allowing the mouth to open slightly.

Done correctly you should feel the lower teeth moving backwards in relation to the upper, as your whole lower jaw retracts.

Relax, and allow your jaw to move forwards again, keeping your chin on the same level. Avoid looking up and down. Repeat five times, and on several occasions per day.

Do this exercise for a few days and if you feel it is helping, move on to exercise 2:

2. As in exercise 1, sit comfortably in a chair, resting against the back rest. Place the web of your thumb and forefinger again against the front of the lower jaw with the teeth slightly apart.

As before, using your hand press gently against your chin to force your lower jaw gently backwards. Done correctly, you should feel the lower teeth moving backwards in relation to the upper teeth, just as in exercise 1. Don't open your mouth any further.

You will feel a stretch deep with the jaw joint. Don't go too deep initially; the intention is to stretch the muscles rather than the capsule of the jaw joint.

Now gently push your lower jaw, not your whole head, forwards against your hand. Hold fast for a few seconds.

Then, relaxing your hand, use your jaw muscles to gently push your lower jaw forwards, so that the lower teeth protrude. Hold for a second or two.

Repeat by gently pushing the jaw backwards again with your

hand. Do this three or four times, several times a day.

3. With your teeth closed gently against each other, rest the tip of your tongue against the top of your mouth, just behind the front teeth.

Now run the tip of your tongue backwards along the top of your mouth, keeping the teeth closed, until you can just reach the soft palate.

Lastly, slowly open your mouth, trying to keep the tongue against the soft palate. When you feel your tongue being pulled away from the soft palate, STOP.

NB. Stop opening your mouth before the jaw pops if you have a popping jaw. Hold this position for a few seconds and then relax. Repeat only once or twice to begin with.

4. Cervical Retraction ‘Chin Tucks’:
Standing or sitting with shoulders back and chest up, bring your chin straight back, creating a ‘double chin’. Do not allow your head to bend up or down as you do this. Hold for 2-3 seconds, repeat 10 times.