

# Arbutus Station Dental

## Managing your jaw system during dysfunction

Orofacial pain and temporomandibular disorder are terms used to describe a variety of clinical problems involving the jaw muscles and/or joints. The spectrum of these conditions is wide, and your individual treatment course may require consultation with an orofacial pain specialist. Initially therapy usually involves education and a preventative self-care program (described below).

Outcomes are improved with early intervention. Future interventions might include prescription medications, oral appliances, physical therapy or referral to an oral medicine specialist who deals with these issues exclusively to manage your care. The ultimate goal is to reduce your symptoms so that you are comfortable and can function normally. That does not mean the symptoms will never return, and for some people the condition becomes chronic.

## Awareness of habits and jaw use patterns

- The teeth are supposed to make contact during eating and swallowing, but at no other time. When the jaw is not working during eating, swallowing, yawning and talking, the teeth should be slightly apart and the jaw should be at rest.
- Notice any contact your teeth make.
- Notice any positions your jaw continually returns to.
- Notice any clenching, grinding, gritting, tapping of teeth or tensing of jaw muscles.
- Notice when these tooth contacts or the jaw muscle tensing most often occurs, such as during driving, studying, reading, social situations, conversation, stress, work, fatigue, sports.
- Be aware of whether you are able to eat on both sides.
- Do not test the jaw. You may feel the need to periodically move your jaw around to check whether you are making progress and to see if the soreness is resolving, avoid doing so, as this can further stress the joints and muscles of the jaw and aggravate the problems you are trying to eliminate. As a result, avoid opening and swinging the jaw from side-to-side beyond the comfortable range of motion.
- Avoid leaning on your chin or jaw. This also applies to positioning your head to cradle a telephone against your shoulder.
- Nighttime grinding (bruxism) is often a source or cause of jaw pain. To identify if this is contributing to your problem, ask a partner if you are grinding your teeth at nighttime or if you often have soreness upon waking in the morning. If this is the case, a night-guard can be made to help alleviate your symptoms.

## Positioning of the jaw to avoid tooth-contacting habits

- Place the tip of the tongue just behind the top front teeth and keep the teeth apart.
- Maintain this position whenever the jaw is not being used.

## Avoid wide jaw openings

- Excessively wide movements will place greater stress on the jaw joints and muscles.
- Brace your jaw during yawning: place your fist under chin or tuck your chin down.

### Diet modification

- Softer foods place less stress on the jaw muscles and joints.
- Avoid eating hard or crunchy foods that require you to chew forcefully.
- Avoid foods that require you to “bite-off” pieces with the front teeth.
- Do not chew gum or “chewy” foods that require more repeated jaw movement.

### Sleep patterns

- Avoid sleeping on your stomach.
- Avoid sleeping positions where the jaw is rested upon a hand or arm which applies considerable pressure to the jaw.

### Stress management

- Try to avoid taking on additional stressful commitments that may adversely affect your present problem or that would infringe on your ability to manage your jaw problems.

### Moist heat application

- Heat increases blood flow to affected muscles and is applied for pain reduction and relaxation.
  - Place two towels in hot water. Wrap one towel under the chin and up onto the side of the head. As the towel loses its heat replace it with the other towel. Alternate towels in this way for 10-15 minutes. Do this at least twice per day.
  - Or, partially fill a hot water bottle to allow flexible placement on the face, squeezing out any air to ensure best heat transfer. Wrap the hot water bottle in a damp towel and place against one side of the face for 10-15 minutes and then switch.

### Cold application

- Icing is especially good for 24-48 hours after an injury or event that aggravates the jaw. The effect of ice application is reduction in pain and swelling.
  - Use ice application for 10-15 minutes at a time. Wrap a gel pack or bag of frozen peas using a thin towel then apply to sore area.

### Jaw stretch exercise

- We might recommend a controlled opening and closing exercise, if the range of motion of your jaw is limited.
- Instructions: place and hold the tip of your tongue against the palate just behind your front teeth then slowly open and close your mouth 10 times without releasing the tongue from that spot. Repeat 10 times per day.