

Patient information

Jaw joint malfunction and associated facial pain

The majority of jaw joint problems are mechanical in origin resulting from excessive use, for example, chewing very hard foods (tough meats, toffees, chewing gum), opening the mouth too wide (yawning, singing, shouting) and various tension habits associated with stress, tooth clenching and grinding.

As a result the ligaments holding the joint together become stretched and the disc of the cartilage within becomes displaced. This produces a click or grating feeling when the jaw is moved and if the damage becomes worse then pain occurs in the joint (often interpreted as earache).

Associated cramp or spasms of the jaw muscles may occur producing a dull ache or a sharp, stabbing pain in the side of the head, cheek and along the bottom of the jaw (and stiffness which prevents wide opening of the mouth). This is commonly worse at the end of the day when the muscles are tired or in the morning if there is a tooth-grinding habit during the night.

The majority of jaw joint malfunctions get better with sustained rest; exercise is **not** a solution. With time, the ligaments become stronger again and the cartilage repositions. However, the sufferer must live on a continuous soft diet and learn to chew in a way which is comfortable, with the minimum of clicking. It is important to chew more carefully, take much smaller mouthfuls and take longer over eating.

The worse thing to do is to open the mouth wide and bite into large, hard pieces of food, for example, apples or bread rolls. These must be sliced or broken into thin pieces. The jaw must be supported underneath while yawning, shouting and singing and playing certain wind instruments should be avoided. Avoid chewing gum, toffees and nail biting.

Any tooth clenching or grinding habit should be identified and eliminated. Many people clench and grind their teeth as a response to stress, which includes concentration on a particular task, keeping to unrealistic timetables and generally trying to do too much. This is similar to what is described as tension headaches but affecting the muscles of the face rather than the neck and the back of the head.

If these measures are followed then the joint should repair after some months and normal joint function will be possible. It is rarely a sign of a more serious medical problem.

Avoid

- Opening the mouth too wide. An adult needs to be able to place two fingers only between the front teeth.
- If mouth opening feels restricted do not force opening but allow time for this to settle spontaneously.
- Biting into apples and large rolls.
- Chewing tough meats, gum/toffee.
- Nail biting.
- Singing.
- Open mouth yawning.
- Shouting.

Helpful measures

- Heat packs.
- Voltarol / Ibuprofen gel.
- Slice all food thinly.
- Do not bite large pieces of food.
- Chew slowly and avoid clicking noises if possible.
- Take longer over eating.
- Support the chin during yawning.
- Stress management; techniques such as relaxation or mindfulness.

Sources of information

NHS 111

Telephone: 111

www.nhschoices

Your GP

Conquest Hospital:

Maxillofacial Unit Tel: 0300 131 4500 Ext: 773207.

Eastbourne District General Hospital

Maxillofacial and Orthodontic Unit - Tel: 0300 131 4500 ext: 771756

Out of hours:

In an emergency, go to your nearest Emergency Department (A&E).

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

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Hand hygiene

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After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:

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Responsible clinician: Julia Cousins, Hannah Williams