

## 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.
- Biting into apples.
- Biting into large rolls.
- Chewing tough meats.
- Chewing gum/toffee.
- Nail biting.
- Singing.
- Open mouth yawning.
- Shouting.
- Stress.

- Overwork.
- Trying to achieve unrealistic goals.
- Unnecessary punctuality.

## Helpful measures

- 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.
- Eight hours sleep, eight hours work and eight hours play – nothing else is good for your health.

## Sources of information

### NHS 111

Telephone: 111  
www.nhschoices

### Your GP

### Conquest Hospital:

Maxillofacial Unit Tel: 0300 131 4500 Ext: 773208.

### Eastbourne District General Hospital

Maxillofacial and Orthodontic Unit - Tel: 0300 131 4500 ext: 771757

### 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

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: 0300 131 4731 (direct dial) or by email at: [esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net)

## Hand hygiene

The trust is committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

## Other formats

**If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.**

**Tel: 0300 131 4434 - ask for the Equality and Human Rights Department.**

Email: [esh-tr.accessibleinformation@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.accessibleinformation@nhs.net)

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## Reference

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

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Next review date: January 2024

Responsible clinician: Lesley Davies

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