

DENTAL DEPOT

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TREATING ORAL HABITS WITH A BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

PURPOSE: To help relax the facial muscles and joints
To reduce habits such as clenching and bruxism
To encourage physical healing of muscles and joints
To increase awareness of behaviors which strain the joints and muscles of the head and neck

BACKGROUND: Behaviors such as clenching, grinding, or holding the jaw rigid strain the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) and the muscles of the face and neck. This may cause or contribute to pain in the head, face or neck; these pain symptoms are often called “temporomandibular disorders” or “orofacial pain disorders”. When these muscle and joint tightening behaviors occur often (or over a long period of time) they become **habits** that can be very difficult (but not impossible) to change. Often orofacial pain problems can be managed by:

1. Working with the muscles and joints directly to rehabilitate them (e.g., physical therapy exercises, possible splint therapy) and
2. Changing behaviors that put strain on the muscles and joints (e.g. oral habits such as clenching).

COMMON HABITS:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| - Tooth clenching or grinding | - Splint habits |
| - Holding jaw muscles rigid | - Holding objects between teeth |
| - Mouth or lip biting | - Biting nails or cuticles |
| - Tooth tapping habit | - Leaning on chin |
| - Jaw or tongue thrust | - Unilateral chew |
| - Telephone use of position | - Stomach sleep |
| - Chewing gum or sucking hard candy | - Other _____ |

Learning a New Habit: Learning any new habit involves three steps:

Readiness to learn, awareness of the old habit
Gaining knowledge about the new habit (what to do)
Practice of the habit

The first of these, **Readiness to learn**, you already have or you would not typically be here.

Knowledge about the new habit will be reviewed with you by the behavioral therapist/psychologist and/or the physical therapist. Please ask questions of any team member if you have any questions about this.

The new habit that you need learn involves how to relax the facial muscles, joints and tongue. The correct (relaxed) jaw position is **TONGUE UP, TEETH APART, JAW DROPPED AND RELAXED**. Check for correct head and neck posture as well. Also, you may add a deep breath or two if this helps with general relaxation. If you are used to holding the tongue, teeth and jaw muscles in a different position, learning a new habit may be challenging.

The third step, **Practice**, is often the most difficult. We would like you to practice the new habit 2-3 times per hour. We understand that this is easier said than done. The team members will work with you to help you find a way to build the practice into your daily routine. The new habit takes only 10-15 seconds to practice; the challenge is to practice often. For every minute you are relaxing the jaw in the **TONGUE UP, TEETH APART, JAW DROPPED AND RELAXED** position, this is a minute that you are not engaging in any of the incorrect oral habits listed above. In essence this practice involves a muscle relaxation exercise specific to the jaw, head and neck. At the same time, your awareness of incorrect oral habits will increase and you will soon find yourself automatically “correcting” and relaxing when you notice muscle tightening habits.

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS: Many other physical factors may contribute (directly or indirectly) to your pain, including sleep habits, dietary habits, and use of caffeine, alcohol, medications, exercise habits and stress. Take good care of your body. It appreciates regularity (e.g., eating and sleeping at about the same time each day). When you take care of yourself generally, your body improves in its ability to resist the stresses of everyday living.

STRESS AND OROFACIAL PAIN: Stress does not cause pain directly. Stress may make it more difficult to tolerate pain and may affect your motivation or ability to follow through with muscle rehabilitation, relaxation and other recommendations for healthier living. You may engage in poor habits more often when you are under stress. Please discuss this with members of the team. Learning general relaxation exercises and using alternative ways to deal with life's challenges may be helpful for you. What is most important is that all the possible contributors to your physical problem are addressed so that you can have the best treatment result in the near future (3-6 months) as well as good long-term maintenance of relaxed and healthy muscles.

CHRONIC PAIN: Chronic pain is a term used to describe pain that has lasted for a long period of time with minimal or no relief. When you have had pain for a long period of time you are likely to find yourself increasingly more frustrated and irritable and sometimes depressed. This is a fairly predictable response to pain that is constant. If this is the case, you may want to discuss these frustrations with a member of the team. Often there are different approaches or ways to change lifestyles and attitudes that can be very helpful in dealing with frustrations and depression as well as physical pain.