

Helping Your Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) Heal



The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is a ball-and-socket joint located where the upper and lower jaws meet. When the TMJ and related muscles are injured, they need time to heal. Self-care is very important. You can take steps to reduce pressure on the TMJ and speed healing.

Eating with care

Chewing strains the TMJ. When symptoms are bad, you may not be able to chew at all. To get you through times when your symptoms are at their worst, try these tips:

- **Choose soft foods.** These include scrambled eggs, oatmeal, yogurt, quiche, tofu, soup, smoothies, pasta, fish, mashed potatoes, milkshakes, bananas, applesauce, gelatin, or ice cream.
- **Don't bite into hard foods.** These include whole apples, carrots, and corn on the cob. Instead cut foods into bite-sized pieces.
- **Grind or finely chop meats and other tough foods.** Try hamburger meat instead of steak.

Using ice and heat

Your healthcare provider may suggest using ice and heat. Ice helps reduce swelling and pain. Heat helps relax muscles, increasing blood flow.

- **Use a gel pack or cold pack for severe pain.** Apply for 10 to 20 minutes. Repeat as needed. To make a cold pack, put ice cubes in a plastic bag that seals at the top. Wrap the bag in a clean, thin towel or cloth. Never put ice or a cold pack directly on the skin.
- **Use moist heat for mild to moderate muscle pain.** Apply a moist, warm towel to the muscles for 10 to 20 minutes. Repeat as needed.

Staying away from triggers

Certain activities (called triggers) strain the TMJ, making symptoms worse. The tips below can help you stay away from common triggers and limit strain:

- **Don't eat hard or chewy foods.** These include nuts, pretzels, popcorn, chips, gum, caramel, gummy candies, carrots, whole apples, hard breads, and even ice.
- **Reschedule routine dental visits, like cleanings, if your jaw aches.** If you have severe pain, call your healthcare provider.
- **Support your jaw when yawning.** When you feel a yawn coming on, put a fist under your jaw. Apply gentle pressure. This helps prevent wide, painful yawns.
- **Don't do any activity that hurts.** This includes nail biting, yelling, and singing.

Maintaining good posture

Work at improving your posture during the day and when you sleep. Good posture can help your body heal. Try these tips:

- **Use a headset when on the phone.** Don't cradle the phone with your shoulder.

- **Keep ergonomics in mind.** This includes making sure your workstation fits your body. Support your lower back. Take breaks often to stretch and rest. If you use a computer, keep the monitor at eye level.
- **Keep your head in a neutral position.** Keep your ears in line with your shoulders. Don't slouch or crane your head forward.
- **Use an orthopedic pillow.** Use this to support your head and neck during sleep.

Follow up with your healthcare provider

It's important to see your healthcare provider regularly, especially if your pain doesn't get better. Discuss other treatment choices with your healthcare provider. Your provider may advise the following:

- Medicines, such as pain relievers or muscle relaxants
- An intraoral appliance, such as a nightguard, to decrease clenching and grinding of teeth
- Physical therapy or exercises to strengthen your jaw muscle
- Relaxation methods or counseling to reduce stress

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