



CONSERVATIVE THERAPY FOR TEMPOROMANDIBULAR JOINT DISCOMFORT

The most common disorder that affects the TMJ is spasm of the muscles surrounding the jaw joint. The muscles are fast-twitch muscles and with clenching and grinding of the teeth, they burn out their oxygen supply. With that, the muscles produce lactic acid and other things that cause muscle inflammation and further spasm of the muscle. There is typically multiple areas within the muscle called trigger points that are tight balls of muscle that need to be relaxed. There is also swelling of the muscle with inflammation and this swelling expands against a tight covering of the muscle called fascia. This fascia has nerve receptors that when activated by the muscle swelling that leads to pain over the jaw. These are all areas that we target with conservative therapy of the TMJ disorder.

1. Muscle relaxant-you will typically be prescribed a muscle relaxant. This is to be taken usually just at night and this will essentially stop any night grinding. If it is non-sedating to you, it is ok to take it up to three times per day. The muscle relaxant will obviate the need for any splint that you may wear at night.
2. Anti-inflammatory-An anti-inflammatory such as ibuprofen or Aleve is one of the critical parts of therapy. As long as your stomach can tolerate the medicine, it should be taken for up to 3 weeks. Aleve is typically a better medication as it is a more potent anti-inflammatory and it only needs to be taken twice per day. Any anti-inflammatory should be taken with food, or just after having eaten.
3. Heat-heat can be used as often as is tolerated or available. It should not be too hot so as to cause discomfort or damage to the skin. It is best used by alternating in 20 minute intervals. It can also be alternated with ice if that feels comfortable to you. Heat helps deliver oxygen to the muscles that are deprived of oxygen.
4. Massage/trigger point release-you have been shown how to perform trigger point release. Basically you touch throughout the muscle that is tender and feel for little "knots" in the muscle. You want to press on these not so hard that it hurts but so that you feel some pressure. Press with one or two fingers for about 5 seconds, release, and then take your entire hand or palm and gently massage the entire muscle for about 15 seconds. This should be done at least 5 times per day, or as often as is tolerated. This helps to mechanically break up the muscle spasm as well as help bring in oxygen rich blood flow to the area.
5. Soft diet-this is the most difficult part of therapy. There should be no gum chewing, or repetitive jaw movements. Anything chewy should be avoided. It does not mean a liquid diet, but things such as scrambled eggs that can be put up and swallowed with minimal chewing are best. Anything where you have to bite through or use your teeth to chew significantly should be avoided. This is the way that the jaw muscles are rested.
6. Ergonomics-the muscles that oppose the jaw muscles are the muscles of the neck and shoulder. You should think of ways that you can relax your shoulders and avoid hunching your shoulders up. Things to avoid are using your jaw to cradle a phone, using a computer where your fingers are above your elbows, or anything that requires shrugging of the shoulders.
7. Sleep with the head elevated and on your back-if you don't naturally sleep on your back, you may be putting pressure on your jaw when you sleep. The easiest way to be able to sleep on your back and avoid jaw pressure is to get 6 pillow-place 1 under the small of your back, 2 under the mid portion of your back, and 3 under your shoulder blades. The goal is to have no pillows resting above the prominence at the back of your skull. This will help position your jaw forward and take any pressure off of your jaw. It will also help if you are not accustomed to sleeping on your back to help avoid you ending up sleeping on your side.

If there are any questions about anything in this form, please don't hesitate to contact the office.