

How to Care for Jaw Pain



Allina Health

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Use Good Posture

To reduce muscle tension in your upper back, neck and jaw, keep your spine in a neutral position.

- Sit down or stand.
- Keep your back straight. (Don't slouch or arch your back.)
- Make sure your head is straight. Look forward. (Don't tip your head down or up.)
- Squeeze your lower shoulder blades together in a downward motion.
- Hold this position for 5 seconds with your arms relaxed on your lap or at your side.

Option: Keep this posture during the day whether you are sitting or standing.

When sitting, you may need to put a rolled up towel either horizontally against your low back or vertically in the middle of your back to help you stay in this posture.



Check your posture at least 10 times each hour. Make changes as needed. In time, your “muscle memory” will change and you will have the correct neutral posture.

Once you have learned to correct your posture to neutral, check the muscle tension at your neck or jaw to tell if you need to relax a specific area. (You can't reduce muscle tension at an area if you don't know it's there.)

Use Good Jaw Posture

It is important to correct your jaw posture to control your symptoms. To reduce muscle tension, check your jaw for signs of clenching.

- Your teeth should not touch each other during the day unless you are chewing.
- Place your tongue lightly on the roof of your mouth. Do not let your tongue touch the back of your front teeth. This position will allow your teeth to come apart to relax your clenching muscles.
- This correct tongue position will allow you to “cluck” your tongue.
- Check your jaw position at least 10 times each hour or more often if you are not talking. If you still feel tension in this posture, relax your jaw while keeping your tongue on the roof of

your mouth. Do not hold your mouth open in this position. Maintain this position until you feel the tension relax.

Use Good Sleep Posture

It is important to maintain a neutral spinal posture while you sleep.

- Avoid using pillows that too flat or too fluffy.
- Try to sleep on your back with a pillow that has the correct thickness to keep your neck “in neutral.” You may use a pillow under your knees for low back support. (**Note:** Do not sleep on your back if you have sleep apnea.)
- If you can’t lie on your back, sleep on your side. Use a pillow with enough firmness to keep your neck neutral.
- Gently fluff the pillow to support your jaw from moving to the right or to the left.
- To reduce tension in your jaw muscles, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth when you fall asleep.



Move your tongue back to this position if you wake up in the middle of the night.

- **Never** lie on or sleep on your stomach. This adds a lot of force through your neck and jaw.



- **Never** sleep with your hands resting against or under your jaw. You may rest your hands above your ears if it does not change your head position from neutral.

Avoid Strain on Your Jaw and Neck

You can reduce jaw tension by avoiding anything that put strain on your muscles or joints.

These include:

- clenching your jaw muscles with either teeth touching or when apart
- grinding your teeth
- biting your lips, tongue or inside cheeks
- pushing your tongue against your teeth, sucking or chewing on objects (such as candy, pens or fingernails)
- smoking

- leaning on your chin with your hand
- “cracking” your neck.

Avoid any unnecessary side-to-side jaw movements. If you smoke and are not ready to quit, do not smoke on one side. Correct your neck and jaw posture without your jaw jutting forward. Smoke in the front of your mouth in the center.

Eat Foods That Don't Cause You Pain

- Until your symptoms are under control, eat softer foods such as casseroles, canned fruit, soups, eggs, yogurt and anything that does not cause pain.
- Do not chew gum.
- Do not eat:
 - hard foods (such as apples or carrots)
 - chewy foods (such as steak, licorice, hard breads, bagels, caramels or Rice Krispies® bars)
 - foods that are large (such as sandwiches, hamburgers or corn on the cob).
- Cut foods into pieces the size of your thumbnail.
- Chew on both sides of your mouth at the same time to reduce the strain on one side.
- Chew slower so your jaw muscles don't get tired.
- Correct your neck posture to make sure you are in the neutral position with chewing.

Avoid Keeping Your Mouth Open

Until the pain has reduced, avoid activities that involve opening your mouth wide that may produce pain.

This may include yawning, yelling, sneezing or long dental appointments. If you can't avoid these activities, limit the amount of opening to protect your jaw.

Best way to yawn with the least pain:

- Have the correct spine and head posture.
- Put your tongue on the roof of your mouth.
Tuck your chin toward your throat. Yawn slowly.
- If yawning is still painful, tuck your chin more or put your hand under your chin to keep your mouth from opening too wide.

Avoid Caffeine

Caffeine causes your muscles to contract and to become tenses. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, most sodas, chocolate and some appetite suppressants.

Decaffeinated coffee also has some caffeine.

Two to three cups of de-caf is the same as one cup of caffeinated coffee. (Sanka® is one brand that has no caffeine.)

Try to avoid any caffeine. If you can't, space how much you drink — and eat — during the day.

Limit your caffeine to one to two 8-ounce servings each day.

Gourmet coffees from coffee shops may have as much as two to three times more caffeine as home-brewed coffee. (Buy your coffee beans or grounds at a grocery store. Avoid brands from coffee shops.)

Relax

Practice quieting or relaxing breathing activities during the day. (Your goal is 4 to 6 sets a day.)

When you start, learn this skill lying down in a comfortable position, but then progress to performing during the day, with your home exercise program, or when you notice your muscle tension increasing.

- In a spinal “neutral position,” breathe in through your nose.
- Expand your lower stomach and rib cage up to 4 to 5 seconds as you allow the air to fill your rib cage.
- Breathe out slowly for 4 to 5 seconds through your mouth.
- Repeat for 5 to 10 cycles or until you feel relaxed.

Use this relaxation to help you fall asleep.

Avoid Headaches

Try to stop a headache within one minute when you notice it has started or gotten worse.

- Readjust your spine position.
- Briefly relax your jaw by putting your tongue on the roof of your mouth.
- Massage your jaw or neck muscle or do neck stretches.
- Apply ice or heat as directed. (See the following sections on pages 8-10.)
- Lie down to rest.
- If allowed, take pain relief medicine. Follow package directions.

Use Heat or Cold Packs

You may use heat, ice or alternate between the 2 on painful or tight muscles. Most people like heat for muscle pain and ice for joint pain. Use which one is best for you.

■ Heat

- Use a neck wrap made of dried rice, beans, corn or cherry pits; moist heat; or the corner of a heating pad on the TMJ or neck area.
 - Wrap it inside a white flour-sack kitchen towel or thin fabric so that you may tie it around your face or neck.

- Keep it in place for up to 10 to 15 minutes.
- Use it 2 to 4 times a day.
- **Optional moist heat:** Wet a towel with warm water. Keep it warm by wrapping around a hot water bottle. Warm the towel in the microwave for about 1 minute on high or run it under very warm tap water.

■ Cold

- Use a frozen gel pack, frozen small bag of peas, or ice wrapped in a thin washcloth to the painful area until you begin to feel some numbness.
 - Wrap it in a flour-sack towel and tie around your TMJ area. Do not put frozen items or ice directly on your skin.
 - Keep it in place for up to 10 minutes.
 - Use it 2 to 4 times a day.
- **Option:** You may put ice cubes inside your mouth on the painful side to melt at the same time you are using ice on your skin. Do not suck on ice or move the ice inside of the mouth. Just keep it in place to melt.

■ Heat and cold

- Use a combination of heat and ice 2 to 4 times a day.
- Apply heat as directed on pages 8 and 9 to the TMJ/jaw area for 10 minutes.
- Lightly brush the painful area with 1 to 2 ice cubes wrapped in a thin washcloth until the area is not quite numb. This is usually less than 2 minutes.
- Repeat the heat and ice cycle for 4 to 5 times.

Use Heat in Cold Weather

Your neck and jaw symptoms may get worse when you are in cold weather. This can happen when you walk from your car to or from work, play with your children outside, walk outside or when you shovel snow.

To keep your jaw from clenching in response to the cold, use a microwaveable wrap around your neck under you coat when you go outside.

This heat will come up your neck to your jaw to help prevent your symptoms from starting or getting worse. If you use it as you go to work, microwave the wrap at home and put it around your neck as you drive to work and walk from your car into the building. Repeat the process for your drive home.

Take Care When Visiting the Dentist

- Before any dental visit, remind your dentist and hygienist that you have a history of TMJ pain.
- Ask for several breaks during the appointment.
- Request to use a bite block to hold your mouth open. (You still will need to ask for breaks to remove this.)
- Two to three days before your appointment, do your massage or stretching exercises.
- Try to schedule your appointments later in the day. This will allow your muscles to be more limber. Some dental clinics have hot packs to be used to warm the cheek muscles before to a long dental procedure.

Use Approved Over-the-Counter Medicines

Talk to your doctor or dentist before you use any over-the-counter medicines to make sure it is safe for you to use.

There are two types of pain relief medicines:

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (or, NSAIDs) reduce joint or muscle pain, and relieve pain. Generic names are ibuprofen (such as Advil® or Motrin®) and naproxen (Aleve®).
- Pain-reducing medicines relieve pain and reduce fever. Generic names are acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and aspirin.

- Avoid medicines that have caffeine, such as Anacin[®], Excedrin[®] or Vanquish[®] because they may cause more muscle tension or rebound symptoms.

What to do if Your Jaw Locks

Your jaw may lock in a closed or opened position. This means you may **not** be able to close it or open it. **If your jaw locks, this is an emergency.**

If you are unable to get it unlocked, have a family member call your TMJ clinic, a hospital emergency room or your family doctor or dentist.

Ask about using prescription muscle relaxers or anti-inflammatories in your case.

Note: Not all dentists try to unlock this situation, but call and ask as quickly unlocking your jaw will give you better success for a full recovery. Go to an Emergency Department if needed.

Use heat at the muscles or ice high at the TMJ often during the day to help resolve this condition.





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