



# Managing Jaw Pain

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## Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ)

The TMJ connects the lower jaw to the skull in a socket that involves a fibrous disc and a grouping of muscles that control the movement of the jaw in the joint.

Pain in the jaw or joint is often related to problems with the muscles, but can also be due to other factors such as dislocation of the joint or arthritis.

TMJ pain can be acute or chronic. There are many approaches to treatment, we recommend starting with conservative methods as many times this is the most effective and safest approach.

### • *Guidelines for managing jaw pain from home*

**Moist Heat:** Use a heat pack or hot water bottle wrapped in a warm, moist towel and apply to joint and muscle area. Be careful not to burn yourself.

**Ice:** In an acute flare up, ice packs can decrease inflammation. Do not place ice directly on skin, use for 10-15 minutes at a time and wait 20 minutes between uses.

**Soft Diet:** Avoid hard, crunchy foods such as raw apples, carrots and nuts. Avoid chewy or tough foods that will cause overworking and strain on the joint. Take small bites or cut your food first and avoid opening wide.

**Self Massage:** Pressure can be applied using 2-3 fingers or thumbs to stimulate the muscle and target tension areas. Start just in front of the ear lobes and work your way down and forward toward your jaw line. You can apply constant pressure and drag along this line or knead the tissues. Apply gentle but firm pressure.

**Medicine:** Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) can be used short-term (5-7 days) for acute TMJ pain.

**Relaxation Techniques:** Muscle tension is often related to clenching, grinding and stress. Deep, slow breathing enhances relaxation (inhale deeply from abdomen and hold for 2-3 seconds, exhale slowly as you relax shoulders down). Practice 30 minutes of low impact exercise such as walking or yoga 4-5 days a week. Some find massage therapy, acupuncture and meditation to be helpful.

**Posture and sleeping:** Keeping your shoulders down helps relax jaw muscles. Keep teeth apart and lips in a relaxed, slightly open position when not eating or swallowing. Try to check yourself every 5-10 minutes. Sleeping on your back with support under your neck is the best position for the TMJ. Stomach or side sleeping can put uneven pressure and stress on your jaw.

**Night guard:** A firm bite splint while you sleep can help stabilize your bite and reduce the harmful effects of nocturnal parafunction (clenching/grinding). It also puts your muscles in a more open, relaxed position.

*\*If symptoms worsen or do not improve with conservative measures always tell your doctor*