

Understanding Stress and TMJ Dysfunction

Stress can play an integral role in everyone's lives whether you are a busy mother or high profile executive. Unfortunately, emotional stress can very often predispose an individual to physiological complications or conditions.

One condition that is commonly associated with un-managed or increased stress is temporal mandibular joint dysfunction, or "TMJ Dysfunction." TMJ dysfunction, sometimes referred to as "lock jaw," is a term given to the abnormal movement of the joint of the jaw. Often times, problems in the jaw joint can lead to muscular complications which cause referred pain/strain of muscles around the head, neck, ear and shoulder.

What Causes TMJ Problems?

While stress is a significant contributing factor for developing a TMJ condition, additional factors are also at work. For example, poor posture, malocclusion, bruxism (teeth grinding) or trauma (such as whiplash injuries) can predispose an individual to developing a TMJ problem. Even irregular or habitual eating habits such as chewing ice or gum can ex-acerbate a TMJ condition.

Recognizing the Signs of TMJ Dysfunction:

The most common symptoms associated with a problematic TMJ include the following.

(Please consult your physician or dentist if you are experiencing any of these symptoms):

- clicking or pain in the jaw
- "lock jaw"
- ear aches
- tinnitus ("ringing in the ears")
- neck and/or shoulder strain
- headaches
- difficulty with swallowing

How Can Physical Therapy Help TMJ Sufferers?

1. The first step in treating a TMJ condition is to understand the relationship between pain and stress. Your physical therapist can introduce you to relaxation techniques specifically designed to relieve physical tension in the jaw, neck and shoulders. Also, meditation, yoga and tai chi are among many ways to manage increased stress levels that may exacerbate TMJ symptoms.
2. Understanding that certain habits will exacerbate TMJ trouble will help sufferers to avoid increasing symptoms. For example, postural training and performing deep breathing exercises will go a long way in decreasing TMJ related pain.
3. Manipulative techniques such as mobilization of the TM joint and

surrounding soft tissue will decrease tension and improve flexibility of the joint. Normally, the jaw should open wide enough to fit 2 - 3 knuckles between the upper and lower teeth. These techniques can restore the joint's normal range of motion, thereby returning the TMJ sufferer to prior function.

4. Palliative techniques such as massage, heat therapy or electric stimulation can take the edge off pain which is related to TMJ disorders. Decreased pain can mean increased function and relief from the cycle of pain associated with TMJ conditions.

If you experience any of these symptoms consult your physician.

For more information how physical therapy can help, call Briarcliff at (914)762-2222 or Jefferson Valley at (914)245-8807.