

MASSAGE THERAPY FOR FACE, MOUTH AND JAW PAIN

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It is estimated that there are more than 10 million people in North America who suffer from temporomandibular joint disorders (TMJ/TMD). Poor posture causing muscle or skeletal imbalances; improper alignment of the teeth; an injury to the head; stress; and clenching or grinding the teeth can lead to symptoms that include headache; neck, face, shoulder and upper back pain; clicking, popping or grating sounds in the jaw; an inability to open or close the mouth comfortably; pain when biting or chewing; toothache; difficulty swallowing, talking or singing; pain or ringing in the ear(s); hearing loss and dizziness. Who would think that such a small joint, and the muscles that make it function, could cause so much discomfort?

The TM joints are located on either side of the head, approximately 1.25 cm in front of the ear canal where the lower jaw bone (mandible) attaches to temporal bone of the skull. The joint is covered with cartilage and contains a disc which acts as a shock-absorber and allows the mandible to glide easily and pain-free. The joint's function is to open and close the jaw, as well as permit it to slide backward, forward, and from side to side. When you consider that the jaw withstands tremendous pressure when chewing and biting and moves thousands of times throughout the day as you speak and chew, it is clear why such a small joint and the muscles effecting it can cause so much discomfort.

It is not just the joint that causes pain, however. The muscles that are used for chewing can develop tension, spasms and trigger points which prevent proper function of the TM joint and can refer pain to various areas of the head, neck, face and mouth.

In most cases massage therapy can help to reduce symptoms, if not eliminate them entirely, within three to six months. This is accomplished by the therapist developing an individualized treatment plan based on the patient's specific symptoms, an in-depth medical history and a physical assessment. After a full explanation of the initial treatment plan and addressing the patient's questions and concerns, massage therapy techniques are applied to the upper back, shoulders, neck, head and face. Some muscles that function to move the TM joint can only be accessed by placing a gloved finger inside the mouth. Prior to this, a communication method between the therapist and the patient is established, so as to give the patient control over the pressure applied and when to stop the technique.

A crucial component of the treatment plan is a self-care routine which includes stretches, self-massage techniques, ice and heat applications and ergonomic changes to assist with the

development of good posture. If the patient follows the recommended self-care routine daily the treatment plan will progress more quickly.

Temporomandibular joint disorders can be painful and debilitating. However, with a massage therapy treatment plan, a patient can enjoy freedom from head and mouth pain and may no longer require pain or anti-inflammatory medications. In many cases, the need to wear a mouth splint while sleeping can be eliminated. The patient is left at the end of the treatment plan empowered with the knowledge that the TMD symptoms can be controlled with the established self-care routine.

Karen L. Perry, RMT has been practicing for eight years in the Toronto and Newmarket areas. She specializes in the treatment of face, mouth and head pain. Karen can be contact at Mulock & Yonge Chiropractic Health and Wellness Centre, 16775 Yonge Street, Newmarket Ontario. (905) 898-6644. For more information see WWW.tmjtmheadfacepain.com.