



CARE FOR TEMPOROMANDIBULAR JOINT DISORDER (TMD)

What is TMD?

TMD is an umbrella term for symptoms and conditions that affect the jaw joint (TMJ) and muscles that control jaw movement. The number one cause of TMD is clenching and/or grinding.

It is no exaggeration to say that the worst recurring pains we deal with as dentists stem from clenching and grinding teeth. We express our sympathies! Clenching and grinding are things that oftentimes we do not have much control over, and they also have a remarkable ability to affect your quality of life. Clenching and grinding are actually treated a little differently, however, they share many of the same symptoms. Some of these symptoms you may have recognized already - and some you may not have either experienced or connected. Some clencher/grinders have all of these symptoms in varying severities and some have none at all.

Below is a list of common symptoms.

- tension type headaches, especially morning headaches
- earaches that are not related to ear infection
- tinnitus and/or muted sounds
- regional hot and/or cold sensitivity that escalates and deescalates and even changes location
- sore jaw joints
- clicking or popping in jaw joints
- sore cheek muscles
- bleeding gums despite good oral hygiene
- pain behind the eye
- swollen lymph nodes
- pain in one or both sinuses without sinus infection
- teeth that are sore to chew on
- mobility in teeth
- lines on the insides of your cheeks

Clenching and grinding activities occur on a scale. There are mild, moderate, severe, and extreme cases. The closer you are to approaching 'extreme' status, the more effort it will take on your end to bring your symptoms to a manageable state. One way to think about this is to

score your clenching/grinding with a number on the 10 scale. The higher your score, the more customized therapies it will likely take to bring your symptoms to a manageable state.

The first therapy we employ to address your symptoms is a Night Guard. Realistically, a Night Guard can lower your score about 4 points. Additional therapies may be required to lower your score enough to where you are comfortable. The other therapies we employ are

- 1) Use of a prescription muscle relaxer at night
- 2) Use of a day guard in the case of daytime clenching
- 3) Intraoral and extraoral massage
- 4) Acupuncture
- 4) Botox injections into the masseters

We want to underscore that patience and persistence are required in successfully dealing with advanced TMD. Strict adherence to all instructions is absolutely necessary, especially when you fall in the severe or extreme categories. You must take a very active role in returning your jaw joints and muscles to a state of health.

As your health care partners, we cannot stop you from clenching or grinding. That control center is somewhere in your brain. We do know that stress plays a crucial role in causing an uptick in your clenching/grinding. What we can do is provide therapies to empower you to take back some quality of life. How long will you require some or all of these therapies? Hard to say. All we can hope for is a quick resolution of symptoms. In the meantime, commit to being vigilant by strictly adhering to therapy recommendations.

NIGHT GUARDS

Whether your guard is designed for grinding or clenching, the importance of wearing the guard every night remains the same. Consistency is key! When patients begin the NG journey, it can take time to establish a new routine - usually 3-4 weeks. Be patient with yourself as the newness of NG wear becomes more and more normal. Eventually, the hope is that you will join many many others who recognize the benefits of nightly NG wear, but again, that process can take time.

For a patient who says that they wear their guard 90% of the time, that means one night in ten is open for that inflammatory cycle to commence all over again. When muscles and joints flare up and the whole inflammatory cascade commences, it just takes time for the cycle to run its course and settle again. NGs do not cure inflammation, they prevent inflammation. Do yourself a favor, and commit to NGs use every night! Also, get into the habit of bringing your NG with you to all of your future dental visits, even hygiene visits. We are happy to run NGs through our ultrasonic cleaner while you have your teeth cleaned. Finally, make sure to keep your NG out of the reach of dogs. They're just soft enough and smell just enough like you to be irresistible! More NGs are lost to dogs than any other reason!

DAY GUARDS

NGs will protect your teeth from the effects of clenching or grinding at night. Some patients clench or grind during the day. If that is the case, and you don't or can't wear your NG during the day (they are kind of awkward, right?!), we can make a separate day guard. Day guards are thin retainer-style appliances that don't allow back teeth to touch. They look like a clear orthodontic aligner. Before we ever make a day guard, try to simply increase your awareness of anytime during the day where you find your top and bottom teeth contacting. Teeth should never contact during the day!

MUSCLE RELAXERS

Regarding muscle relaxers, we almost exclusively use a drug called Flexeril (cyclobenzaprine). The therapeutic range of this drug can vary widely, somewhere between 5mg and 30mg. It may take a while to settle on the dose that is right for you. We recommend starting in the 5mg to 10mg range. The goal is to take a dose that allows you to sleep well and not wake up with any fog in the morning. Slowly ramp up in 5mg increments until you find a dose that allows you to wake up feeling normal. You will sleep better. It is non-addictive. Most patients experience positive results, but some will feel some level of grogginess and therefore choose not to use it as a therapeutic aid.

MASSAGE

Massage, specifically a combination of extra-oral and intra-oral massage, is a little-known gem for releasing the tension that builds up in muscles. We are happy to provide a referral, as only a small percentage of massage therapists are certified for intra-oral work.

ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is a treatment based in Traditional Chinese Medicine, a system of healing that has existed for over 2,500 years. It is based on the understanding that Qi (energy or life-force) flows through the body and regulates homeostasis. When Qi does not flow, it can cause illness or pain. Acupuncture uses very thin needles inserted at specific points throughout the body to restore the flow of Qi and in doing so, restore health. The modern understanding is that needling these points stimulates the nervous system to release neurotransmitters and endorphins in the muscles, spinal cord and brain. These chemicals can change the experience of pain and influence the body's internal healing systems.

Specifically for people who suffer from TMJ, Bruxism, Headaches, and other dental issues, acupuncture can decrease local pain and muscle tension. Additionally, acupuncture is particularly useful in treating stress, tension, and emotional conditions that often exacerbate these conditions. Acupuncture can be used alone or can complement other treatments such as

dental care, night guards, oral massage, and chiropractic adjustments, and Botox to achieve relief.

BOTOX

Botox can help relieve myalgia (muscle pain) in temporomandibular disorders (TMD) by targeting the overactive jaw muscles that cause the cascade of symptoms listed above.

Here's a clear breakdown of how it works:

-It blocks nerve signals to the muscle

Botox inhibits the release of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter responsible for telling muscles to contract. This causes a temporary weakening (not paralysis) of the injected muscle.

-It reduces muscle hyperactivity

In TMD-related myalgia, muscles like the masseters (cheek muscles) and sometimes the temporalis (temple area) often feel sore and overworked. Sometimes these muscles have hypertrophied due to overuse. Botox decreases excessive contraction, reduces muscle fatigue and overuse, and helps break the cycle of chronic tension.

-It lowers pain signaling (beyond just relaxation)

Botox doesn't just relax muscle—it also affects pain pathways by reducing the release of pain-related chemicals. This means less pain even beyond the mechanical effect.

-It allows healing and functional reset

With reduced muscle activity, inflamed muscle fibers can recover, trigger points may resolve, and patients often reduce clenching habits subconsciously. This creates a window for rehabilitation (massage, Night Guards, etc.)

Botox is best administered on a set schedule.

Onset is typically after 3–7 days. Peak effect is in the 2-6 week time window. It will last for 3-4 months then it will need to be readministered.

Remember that with any of these therapies, the road to recovery is a process, not an event. Be patient, be teachable, follow instructions, and keep in mind that when one therapy proves ineffective, we can pivot and try another. We make our treatment recommendations as if you were family. We'll get to the bottom of this!

-Your treatment team at Young Dental