

Headaches and Neckaches and Worn Teeth, Oh My!

“Doctor, it’s amazing! For the first time in almost 20 years I woke up without a headache and pain in my back!”

I got the pleasure of hearing that statement this week. Migraine headaches, neck and shoulder pain, stooped posture, facial pain, ringing or congestion of the ears, sleep apnea or excessive snoring; can you believe all these seemingly unrelated maladies might in fact be caused by the relationship of your teeth and jaws?

Most people consider dentistry to be a field devoted to the treatment of teeth and gums, focused on fillings, cleanings, extractions, etc. Dentistry, however, is increasingly becoming aware of the affect of the position of the teeth and jaws on the muscles and skeletal system of the head and neck, a concept called Neuromuscular Dentistry.

Very often, pain arises in the muscles of the head and neck due to strain or overuse. The cause of the pain may be obvious when you have had your head in an odd position for a long time, such as looking behind you or sleeping irregularly. When your bite is incorrect, it causes similar strain on the muscles of your face and neck. Your brain learns to accommodate to the abnormality in your jaw position to “make” your teeth come together. These muscles become programmed to close in a certain position that seems normal to the person, when in actuality the muscles are being overworked and strained. The muscles remain tense for long periods of time and do not get the chance to rest. These muscles suffer from poor circulation, and thus a lack of needed oxygen and an accumulation of toxins. This condition can lead to a variety of problems, including worn teeth (which further amplifies the problem), muscle pain, headaches, jaw joint abnormalities, and other issues. Some people have teeth worn down to complete nubs!

Pain of the neck and shoulders occurs when a persons posture is affected. A similar scenario would be having a pain in your foot that causes you to favor the other side. Walk this way for a while, and your hip and back begin to hurt. A human head weighs on average about 13 pounds. If balanced properly over the spine, the weight is manageable, but if you carry

your head protruded or off balance it becomes much more work. When your jaw position is off significantly, the adaptive centers of your brain again “make” your teeth come together, and this may require leaning to one side or forward. To illustrate this, bend your head forward and close your mouth. Notice which teeth touch together first. Now lean your head back and close. See how your bite can change with a simple change in head position? Correcting the jaw position not only can alleviate the muscle pain, but can also make you stand up straighter and taller!

So how are these problems diagnosed and corrected? The dentist uses computerized technology that can give a very accurate picture of the state of your muscles and joints. They can use a jaw tracking device that shows and records the pattern of the jaw in motion. Small adhesive pads are placed on affected muscles and tests are done using an EEG machine to show the level of tension or relaxation of the muscles. Once information is gathered about the patient's current state, the muscles of the head and neck are relaxed using mild electrical stimulus with a device called a TENS unit (Myomonitor). This overcomes the unnatural accommodated position of the muscles and allows the dentist to see where your jaw truly “prefers” to be. Even people with dentures that have their FALSE teeth set improperly can be treated this way! If this position differs significantly from the bite as it was before TENSing, the dentist can then construct an orthotic mouthpiece to keep your bite in its optimal position. At this point, nothing is done to permanently alter your teeth or bite.

You normally wear this plastic appliance for a certain length of time to establish that the problems or pain caused by an incorrect habitual bite are eliminated. If they are, you may elect to have your natural teeth altered to permanently maintain that new bite position. If symptoms are not substantially alleviated, other problems may be the causative factor of the pain and may be explored.

Treatment of patients with Neuromuscular Dentistry has been done for over 35 years, but is just now becoming mainstream. The results of treating patients with TMJ disorders, headaches, neck and shoulder pain, and other related issues have been amazing! Not everyone is a candidate and not all patients with these conditions can be helped with this type of treatment, so an evaluation with a neuromuscular trained dental professional is crucial. But wouldn't it be great to never have that pain again?