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Medical Massage for Jaw and Joint Disorders

By Boris Prilutsky, MA

"Stay in Touch With..." is a periodic column designed to provide an overview of a particular technique or modality. If you would like to contribute to this column, please e-mail "> .

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As a result of a tremendous exposure to stress, the development of temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders has reached pandemic proportions. TMJ sufferers experience high-intensity headaches, difficulty with chewing, painful joint clicking and popping, and other symptoms. With the progression of the pathology, individuals may even develop sleep disorders.

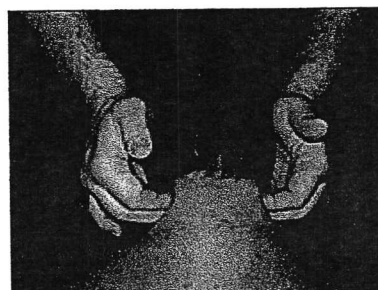
TMJ Anatomy: The TMJ is formed by the temporal and mandibular bones. Attached to the mandibular condyle is a fibrocartilage meniscus or articular disk, which allows the mandible to move smoothly. The masticatory muscles (temporalis, masseter, lateral pterygoid, and medial pterygoid) are responsible for movement and stabilization of the TMJ.

Bruxism: Due to stress, people often develop bruxism. Bruxism is a pathological clenching and grinding of teeth that usually occurs during sleep. Bruxism is caused by the hyperactive contraction of the masticatory muscles. Imagine any other muscles in our support and movement system kept under tight contraction for seven hours. Pathological hypertonus in these muscles will be formed, followed by restriction of range of motion, trigger point development, and other symptoms. With time, hypertonic condition in the masticatory muscles leads to the development of osteoarthritis in the TMJ, including negative effects on the articular meniscus. In such a case, the above-mentioned TMJ pathology starts producing severe headaches and painful "clicks."

Massage therapy and Post-Isometric Relaxation Techniques for TMJ Disorders: Massage therapy should be focused toward the reduction of tension in the masticatory muscles, releasing tension in fascia, and elimination of trigger points. Post-isometric relaxation is an extremely important tool for the restoration of the range of motion. Massage therapy steps for TMJ:

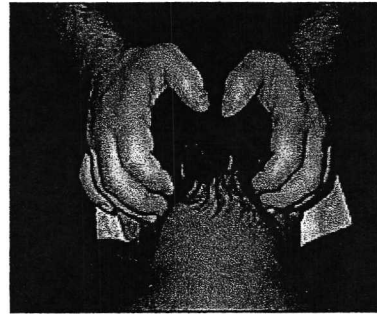
Client is first positioned face down on the stomach

1. With the tips of the fingers, bilaterally, in circular motion, massage the neck area for 4 1/2 to 5 minutes.



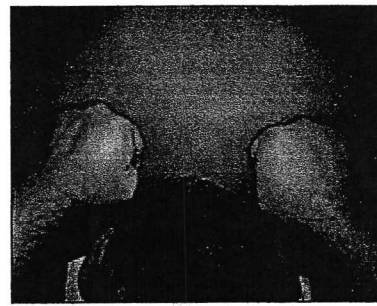
Step 1

2. Place the tips of the fingers around the occipital bone. Under gradually increasing pressure, perform massage on the insertion of the cervical muscles into the skull for 3 1/2 to 4 minutes.



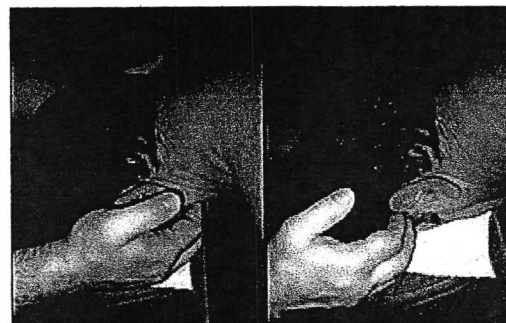
Step 2

3. Place both fists on top of the trapezius. Under gradually increasing pressure, perform massage on top of the trapezius for 30 seconds to 1 minute.



Step 3

4. Ask the client to relax his/her jaw to the extent possible. With the top of the fingers, bilaterally, massage all the masticatory muscles for 5 to 7 minutes.



Step 4a

Step 4b



Step 5a

Client is then positioned face up on the back

5. Ask client to open his/her mouth as wide as possible. Place the thumb on the chin. With the other hand's fingertips, perform massage on the masticatory muscles underneath, stretching for 5 to 7 minutes. Massage each side separately, spending no more than 3 to 4 minutes on the unaffected side.

