

The Best Ways to Relieve Jaw Tension, According to Dentists

By Hilary Reid

September 9, 2020

If you've been reminding yourself to unclench your jaw more often than usual, you're not alone: Dentists are reporting record numbers of tooth fractures, including my own dentist who, during a recent cleaning, told me that she hadn't seen so many cracked teeth since the '08 financial crisis. You may even be clenching your teeth without realizing it. "Many people have *no idea* that they clench and grind their teeth," says Dr. Jennifer Jablow. "It usually occurs during REM." Frequent headaches, tighter facial muscles, and a wider face shape can all be symptoms of teeth grinding and clenching, according to Jablow. **Dr. Michelle Yagoda, NYC Facial Plastic Surgeon and Otolaryngologist, Lenox Hill Hospital notes that jaw-clenching can even show up in the form of ear or throat pain.**

Once a dentist has informed you that you are, in fact, clenching your teeth, there are a few things you can do. Your dentist might suggest being fitted for a custom (prescription) night guard, which will prevent further clenching and grinding. However, if you have mild jaw tension or don't want to spend the money on a potentially pricey guard, there are still plenty of options. We spoke to Yagoda, Jablow, and Dr. Jennifer Plotnick from Grand Dental to hear about their best tips and favorite tools for relieving jaw pain.

Best products for relieving jaw tension

Eyxformula 2 In 1 Face Roller Massager for Face Tightening and Lifting

\$8

Jablow told us that facial massages, combined with “warm moist heat,” are a great way to “break up tension and stagnation of circulation” in the jaw area; she recommends using this inexpensive face roller. “Remove the chin piece and put some oil on your face first,” she says. If the roller looks a bit clunky, you can also just use your hands: “I suggest to my patients to run the top part of their knuckles down from their cheekbone all the way to their chin, applying enough pressure to physically open their mouth,” says Plotnick. “This will help to stretch those ‘closer muscles’ that can often be exercising heavily through the night while clenching or grinding.”

AmazonBasics Terry Cotton Washcloths

\$20

As for applying the warm heat, there’s no better tool than the humble washcloth compress. “Most of the time we recommend warm compresses because it can help the muscle further relax,” says Plotnick. “If you do it a few times during the day, it can have a lasting effect into the night.” Says Yagoda: “If the jaw is able to relax during the daytime by using these things, whatever happens at night is more manageable and you can prevent the problem from becoming extreme.”

De Cecco Pasta Spaghetti No.12

\$2

365 Everyday Value Wild-Caught Seafood Value Pack

\$28

Organic Girl Organic Baby Spinach

\$4

Another way to relieve jaw tension is to simply eat softer foods.

“When you have a lot of jaw clenching or tooth grinding, those ligaments and muscles are extremely tired from constantly being used — like if you had a heavy weight on your bicep and you had to stand there for five hours holding it with the muscle clenched,” Yagoda told us. “So the first thing that’s important is to allow the jaw muscle to relax as much as possible, and that means no gum chewing or hard candies, no biting into hard things like apples or carrots, no crunchy foods like potato chips.” Replace crunchy foods with a “soft diet,” which Yagoda says will allow jaw muscles to relax. “You can have eggs, pasta, soup, fish, some spinach, you just don’t want to eat things that aggravate the muscle,” she says.

Boiron Arnicare Cream

\$13

~~\$18~~ **now 28% off**

Jablow and Yagoda both recommended Arnica as an effective and all-natural pain reliever that’s safe to use topically in the jaw area. “Using a topical anti-inflammatory is important,” says Yagoda. “I always recommend that around the jaw area you use arnica cream, rather than a gel or an ointment (the gel can be very drying to your skin and ointment is really greasy).” Yagoda says to apply the arnica to the area in front of your jaw “where a man’s sideburns would be,” as well as behind your ear “on the hard part of the bone behind your ear and into your neck muscle.” The arnica cream will absorb through your skin, and relieve pain without your needing to take Advil or ibuprofen. And it’s safe to use often: “Arnica doesn’t interfere with any other medicines — it can even be used by babies and children — and it’s very effective,” says Yagoda. “You can put that on four times a day, or even more if you wanted to.”

Natural Vitality Calm #1 Selling Magnesium Citrate Supplement

\$27

~~\$47~~ **now 43% off**

“Magnesium helps relieve muscle and joint pain, and you can take it before bed,” says Jablow, who recommends this magnesium powder that can be mixed with water into a drink. Just note that if you do try magnesium, you should consult with your doctor first. “Magnesium

can be helpful, but supplements are really something that need to be monitored — you don't want to take too much magnesium because it can have side effects or interfere with other medications," says Yagoda.

Paraiba White Dentance Professional Dental Guards

\$18

The tricky thing about dealing with nighttime jaw clenching is that you're ... not awake to deal with it. "You cannot break the habit — it comes from your autonomic nervous system," says Jablow. "You have to manage it." If facial massages and arnica aren't doing the trick, but you still don't want to spring for the dentist-prescribed guard, Jablow says that you can take the drugstore route and buy a moldable upper full-arch night guard. "It helps act as a shock absorber to protect teeth muscles and underlying bone," she says. "It also helps limit the contraction of the overworked muscles."

Headspace: Meditation & Sleep

From \$13

"It's really important to do things to reduce stress overall, because clenching and grinding is a sign of stress," says Yagoda. "Meditation, self-hypnosis, and acupuncture can all be helpful — anything that leads to stress reduction." What relieves stress will differ from person to person, but trying a meditation app like Headspace certainly won't hurt.