

# About...

What TMJ Patients Should  
Know About Dental Hygiene  
and Self Care

**TmJ**

THE TMJ ASSOCIATION

*...Changing the face of TMJ*

The Resource Center for  
Education • Support • Research  
on Temporomandibular (Jaw)  
Joint Diseases and Disorders

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## **What TMJ Patients Should Know About Dental Hygiene and Self Care**

As a TMJ patient you may be experiencing difficulty in completing simple tasks like brushing and flossing. Perhaps these simple daily routines and regular dental check-ups are causing pain or discomfort. It is important for you to know that you are not alone. However, keeping your teeth and gums clean and healthy is one of the most important things you can do for yourself. To make your next dental visit as comfortable and beneficial as possible, a team approach is necessary between you and your hygienist and dentist.

### **What is the role of a dental hygienist?**

The primary role of a hygienist is the maintenance of oral health and the prevention of oral disease. Ultimately, by protecting a patient's teeth and gums the patient's total health is also being protected. Research has proven a link between oral health and overall health and its relationship to systemic diseases.

### **As a TMJ patient, what can I expect from my hygienist?**

Your hygienist should recognize you as an individual and adapt techniques and procedures accordingly. It is important to identify and care for your needs and provide personalized instructional service to help you achieve optimum oral health.

The dental hygiene treatment you receive will depend on your individual needs. Your comfort is an important factor that will also

dictate treatment. This can include appointment length. Depending on preference, appointments may be long or short. Some patients prefer longer appointments to accomplish all of their treatment in one sitting; others prefer spacing out appointments. More frequent appointments can contribute to keeping oral health at a maximum and prevent long, difficult treatment sessions.

It is important to keep in mind that each individual is unique and what works for one person may not work for another. The following suggestions may help to improve your next dental hygiene visit, and make you better equipped to take charge of your oral health and TMJ-related complications.

**Before a dental hygiene visit you should:**

- Consider scheduling your visit at the end of the day if your jaw is stiff in the morning and more relaxed in the afternoon.
- Contact your insurance company to determine coverage for dental hygiene services.
- Know that the national average cost of an adult cleaning and exam is \$60. Prices vary among offices and can range anywhere from \$50 to \$90. X-rays are generally an additional cost.
- Set up an interview or consultation with your dental hygienist before you schedule an appointment. This can take place over the phone or in person. Check with your dentist's office to see if this is possible and if so, what the additional fee or cost would be.

The interview will serve many purposes, including developing rapport and open communication. The attitude of the dentist and hygienist should be one of friendly understanding, reassurance, and acceptance. The interview will allow time for them to listen to your symptoms, concerns, and questions. It will also allow the hygienist to share with you the treatment plan and what types of procedures you can expect at your visits. By knowing what is going to occur, you will feel better prepared and relaxed during your appointments.

- Inform your hygienist if you experience hypermobility, meaning your joints are very loose and bend easily.
- Consult with your physician, surgeon, or dentist if you have a joint replacement including TMJ implant. Because of the susceptibility to infection, you may need antibiotic premedication.
- Consult your physician or dentist if you have been diagnosed with Mitral Valve Prolapse or have other cardiac-related conditions to determine if antibiotic premedication is necessary for you. Each patient must be considered individually. Certain conditions may put you at increased risk for infections and serious complications if premedication is not given before dental and dental hygiene care.

- Inform your dental team if you are anticipating surgery for a joint replacement. All needed periodontal and restorative therapy should be completed before surgery, if possible, to prevent the need for repeated antibiotic premedication.
- Use medications in advance of your appointment to relieve inflammation, muscle spasm and pain. These can range from over-the-counter analgesics to prescription pain medications or muscle relaxants.

**During a dental hygiene visit the following should be considered:**

- Any changes in your medical or dental history and any medications, including over-the-counter drugs that you are taking should be communicated to the hygienist. This information is necessary to create the best care plan for you.
- Utilization of a mouth prop or your hand or fist to support the jaw during treatments.
- Use of cervical and lumbar supports or rolled towels for neck or back discomfort.
- Use of a power-driven instrument, called an ultrasonic or piezoelectric scaler, by the hygienist to clean your teeth.
- If your teeth are sensitive, let your hygienist know. It may be possible to make adaptations to water temperature or application of air.
- Applications of topical anesthetics and, if needed, local anesthesia to lessen the pain and/or anxiety.

- If you have breathing or swallowing difficulties, you may be more comfortable with the chair in a semi-upright position.
- If your eyes are especially sensitive to the dental light, consider bringing sunglasses to wear during treatment. The use of glasses will also protect your eyes from any debris or particles produced during routine cleanings.
- Determining if you are at increased risk for tooth decay, by discussing this with your hygienist. Sealants and/or fluoride treatments may be an option for you in reducing certain types of cavities.
- Being cautious when opening the mouth to avoid overextension and possible hypermobility.

### **After a hygiene visit consider:**

- Ice or heat applications to the jaw.
- Continued use of medications to relieve inflammation, muscle spasm and pain.

### **Self care:**

In order to maintain healthy teeth and gums, daily self-care is essential. If you are not removing plaque on a daily basis, a professional cleaning will only be temporarily effective. The following are suggested methods that may work for you. Together you and your dental hygienist and/or dentist can determine what is best for you.

- Use of a soft toothbrush. These range from adult to children's sizes. It is recommended that you replace your toothbrush every 3-4 months. A worn toothbrush may not clean effectively and

may harm your gums. Toothpastes are available to reduce sensitivity if necessary.

- Power-assisted toothbrushes offer an excellent way to maintain hygiene if the jarring motion does not cause discomfort to your jaw.
- Flossing is the preferred method for cleaning between the teeth. If you cannot open your mouth wide enough to floss your teeth, other alternatives include rubber tip stimulators, interdental brushes, or floss holders. Your hygienist should assist you with an instrument that is right for you and provide proper instruction for its use.
- A commercial oral irrigator may be used if recommended by your dentist or hygienist.
- In addition to brushing and flossing, your hygienist and/or your dentist may also recommend an antiseptic mouth rinse to kill bacteria that can cause plaque and gum disease.
- Fluoride rinses after each meal and prior to bed can also be effective in reducing cavities. Some dentists also recommend a prescription high-fluoride toothpaste.
- Salt or baking soda and water solutions can be used as a rinse at home following dental and dental hygiene procedures. It can easily be prepared, is inexpensive, and may be effective in reducing gingival swelling. If you are on a low-salt or sodium-free diet you should not use a salt water rinse.

- If your mouth opening is very limited, foam instruments called “toothettes,” or moist cotton gauze squares, can be rubbed along the teeth and gums to achieve some plaque removal.
- Appliances such as splints and partials should be brushed daily with a soft brush and toothpaste or should be cleaned with a denture cleanser product.
- By keeping your teeth and gums in good condition, and following proper hygiene instruction, you can help make your visits as comfortable as possible.
- If you have arch bars/wires or other appliances, it is very important to clean the area between the appliance and your gums. Your hygienist may recommend a soft brush or a bi-level brush with a middle row that is shorter and can be applied directly over the fixed appliance. Power-assisted brushes with soft bristles, a light stroke, and at low speeds can be very effective for cleaning around appliances and keeping your gums healthy. Your hygienist may also recommend other aids to clean between your teeth. They include floss threaders and interdental brushes.

Because adequate oral hygiene may be compromised in TMJ patients due to limited range of motion and/or pain, regular dental exams, and cleanings should be scheduled.

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