

Discussion Forum

How Do Our Jaws Become

Misaligned?

Dr. Dana Colson

Various factors can cause jaws to shift, putting strain on the surrounding tissues and muscles in our mouths. If teeth are never formed or pulled because of fractures, abscesses or unsuccessful root canal therapy, the position of our jaws can be modified when the remaining teeth shift over time due to the loss. Misalignment may also be the result of genetics, environmental factors or mouth breathing. Breathing through the mouth over extended time rather than through the nose when at rest or during light exercise can lead to altered tongue position and shifting of the teeth. Mouth breathing is most often due to obstructions or allergies and causes swelling in the tonsil and adenoids. This can persist even after orthodontic treatment and cause relapse. Sometimes bite misalignment can also begin with whiplash, a slight blow to the head or even arthritis.

Jaw problems are also caused by poor oral habits in children. For example, children who suck their thumbs beyond four years of age can push their growing teeth out of position by molding their upper palate with their thumb or fingers. This creates narrow arches, cross-bites and high vaulted roofs in their mouths. Such conditions also encourage mouth breathing and an open bite, which can lead to serious issues. With narrowing of the maxillary arch the tongue postures itself on the floor of the mouth creating a double chin, more predisposition to snoring and further collapse of the maxillary arch. With children when they swallow, they push their tongue against the teeth that do not meet in order to create a closed space. The tongue is one of our most powerful muscles and the sheer strength of its thrusts when swallowing can prevent children from developing a normal bite. The tongue is the bully and wins in forcing and keeping teeth apart. It is also common for children to grind or clench their teeth, putting undue stress on their teeth and jaws. Fortunately, this is a habit that many children leave behind when their permanent teeth come in.

Being Mindful and Developing Good Habits

As dentists we know that paying attention to proper jaw alignment and doing facial exercises and massage may



encourage proper positioning that can relieve headache pain and other problems.

By having the opportunity to discuss with your patient on how their jaw works, you can outline techniques that may help relax various muscles that can relieve pain.

First we must make our patients conscious of their mouth position. Explaining that the ideal position is one which the teeth are a few millimeters apart, that the tongue rests lightly at the junction of the upper teeth and gum tissue and the lips rest lightly together.

The head should also be help in an upright, balanced and a relaxed position. Remember ...and repeat often

Lips together, teeth apart, tongue in place. This is an important mantra to be repeated as habits are difficult to break.

It is important to make patients aware that actions like habitually jutting their chins forward or clenching their teeth because they are angry, or biting down hard on pencils or pen caps while stressed at work or engaging in any other

unconscious habits; can place additional strain on their teeth and jaws.

We need to ask our patients; Does your jaw ache? Do you have a headache? Does your teeth feel like they have had a workout before you have even eaten their breakfast?

To help your patient become aware of the tension they may hold in their jaws or face we can teach them a technique called a “facial scan”.

A facial scan is performed by closing your eyes and asking yourself:

- Are my skin and muscles tense or relaxed?
- Are my teeth touching together lightly or tightly?
- Are my jaws hanging loosely with lips together and teeth apart?
- Where is my tongue sitting? Is it behind my front teeth with the tip lightly touching my palate at the junction of the teeth and gum tissue? Or is it sitting on the floor of my mouth?
- Are my cheeks pulled into the sides where my teeth connect? Or do I chew my cheeks as an unconscious habit? (often this will create a white horizontal line on the inside of the cheek)

By asking and discussing the above questions we can bring awareness to habits that are subconscious. Our teeth are designed to give us a lifetime of service. You can discuss how

teeth are not designed for grinding or clenching, that it is a parafunctional and destructive habit. Pressure on the enamel and dentin can cause premature wear and tear. You can create this analogy by asking your patient to imagine driving a car with new tires and over time the treads wear down so significantly so that there is no traction from the tires and they do not function well. We can begin awareness that often needs to be discussed more than once for people to understand and take ownership of their mouth. ■



Dr. Dana Colson practices wellness-based dentistry in midtown Toronto. She graduated from the University of Toronto in 1977. Throughout her career Dana has committed to extensive continuing education. Dana has studied Acupuncture, Nutrition, Craniosacral Therapy and Homeopathy.

Dana has also taken courses in active listening and NLP. Dana holds accreditation in IAOMT, achieved FAGD, and is a member in several professional organizations, including the ODA/CDA, AACD and HAPA. She is also a graduate of both the Pankey Institute in Florida and the Kois Curriculum in Seattle. Dr. Colson has recently authored the book *Your Mouth: The Gateway to a Healthier You*.

Dana has lectured extensively in Canada and internationally on general, laser and cosmetic dentistry, integrating her unique wellness based approach





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