

COLUMN

Why is my bite guard not helping my TMJ?

Your jaw hurts; you're getting headaches; maybe your teeth feel sore or are worn down, and so your dentist recommends a bite guard. You wear it at night, expecting relief. And sometimes this treatment succeeds. But what happens when it doesn't?



Dentally Speaking

by Jeffrey S. Haddad D.D.S.

the alignment of the joint itself. A bite guard doesn't address those issues and is essentially meant to give your body a break at night with the hope of reducing some of the tension in the jaw. For some people, a bite guard just isn't enough.

may soften the noise, but it doesn't fix the problem.

Why symptoms can persist (or even worsen)

One of the most frustrating experiences for patients is doing everything right and still not getting better.

This happens because:

- The jaw may still be sitting in a strained position
- The muscles are not truly relaxing
- The joint is not being stabilized
- The root cause has not been identified

In some cases, a poorly designed or non-customized (OTC) appliance can even increase muscle activity, making symptoms worse over time. This is why patients often say, "I tried a night guard and it didn't help." And unfortunately, many stop there, never realizing that another solution exists.

The education gap

The fact is that most general dental training does not go into diagnosing and treating TMJ disorders. General dentists are highly skilled in many areas, but TMJ is a specialized field that requires additional training, technology, and a different way of thinking about how the bite, muscles, and joints interact. Because of this, the bite guard becomes the default recommendation. It's conservative, easy to deliver, and a good starting point for patients with mild symptoms, such as morning jaw tension. But for patients with moderate to severe TMJ issues, it's often not enough.

For true, lasting relief, the focus must shift from simply protecting the teeth to stabilizing the entire system.

This involves:

- Identifying the ideal, relaxed position of the jaw
- Allowing the muscles to fully release and function naturally
- Ensuring the joints are not under strain

- Creating harmony between the bite, muscles, and airway

Advanced approaches use precise measurements, muscle relaxation techniques, and computerized jaw tracking technology to determine where the jaw should be, not just where it currently is. (See Figure 1) Once that position is identified and confirmed, treatment can be

designed to support it, leading to relief from symptoms that once felt permanent.

There are other options for you

If you've tried a bite guard and it didn't work, it doesn't mean your condition is untreatable. It means you may not have been given the right treatment yet.

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For many people suffering from TMJ disorders, this is exactly what happens. They follow directions, wear the appliance faithfully, and yet the pain, tension, and dysfunction remain. Understandably, they feel stuck, frustrated, and often assume there is no other option. What most people don't realize is that a traditional bite guard may not be the proper solution at all.

Why bite guards are common

They are designed to:

- Protect teeth from wear
- Reduce the intensity of clenching and grinding
- Provide a temporary cushion between the teeth
- Reduce minor jaw tension or morning headaches

Bite guards are usually the type of treatment suggested by dentists for jaw pain, clenching, and grinding. And to be fair, they can help in certain situations. But not all because most TMJ disorders are not just about the teeth. They are about the position of the jaw, the health of the muscles, and

Jaw position and muscle function

Think of your jaw as a hinge that is constantly in motion talking, chewing, swallowing, even breathing. For that system to function properly, the muscles, joints, and teeth must all work in harmony. When they don't, the body compensates, but many times it accommodates at a price.

A TMJ disorder often means the lower jaw is being forced into a strained or unnatural position. Over time, this can lead to:

- Chronic muscle tension
- Inflammation of the joint
- Headaches and migraines
- Ear symptoms like ringing or fullness or even vertigo
- Neck and shoulder pain

A traditional bite guard doesn't reposition the jaw in a precise therapeutic way. In many cases, it simply creates a barrier between the teeth without correcting the underlying imbalance. It's like putting a cushion under a misaligned door hinge. It



Figure 1: Advanced Treatment for TMJ relief

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You can't take it with you

Many retirees have a spending problem: they don't spend enough! If you are blessed to be one of those people who were raised conservatively and have had the discipline throughout life to save and provide for a successful retirement, then you might also be one of those people who have a hard time spending.

With all financial planning, there is a balance. When it comes to retirement income, there is balance

between how much you should save and how much you should utilize during the years you have left. Naturally, the first step is to run a financial plan to determine how much you can spend annually on a conservative basis. If the plan tells us that you can spend \$150,000/yr while still accounting for all the "what-ifs" in life (long-term care, recessions, inflation, longevity, etc.) and you are spending \$100,000/yr, then it is time to decide.

Option 1) Save the extra \$50,000/yr. Despite providing the most peace of mind, it is important to understand that this huge pile of money is growing only to be passed on to your heirs. Worst case, if estate taxes apply and without proper estate planning, the government could take up to 40% of it.

Option 2) Spend it on yourself. Although this is the most encouraged, I realize that this can sometimes

be the hardest. You have done an amazing job saving and being prudent with your money, but it may be time to shift gears and make the most of all that you worked for. Take the trip, buy the car, pay for the services you would rather not do yourself, and create memories for your family while you still have your health.

Option 3) Spend with purpose. The average age of someone who receives an inheritance is in their early 60s. However the average age of someone who could truly utilize the money in life is in their early 30s. By the time you are 60, you have built a great life and may be ready to retire. Whereas in your 30s, you may be starting a new family, moving into a new house, and doing whatever you can to get ahead. Your purpose may be to help others. Consider taking your loved ones on a vacation, paying for college tuition, helping with medical bills,



Wealth Strategies
by
Dominic Garcia

or opening that first Roth IRA for a grandchild. For those who are charitably inclined, support the causes you truly believe in. Save faithfully and give generously. Both are acts of responsibility. And everyone can agree that

you get much more out of giving while you are alive.

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Bite guards and TMJ

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Common signs that your TMJ issue may require a more advanced approach include:

- Persistent jaw pain or tightness
- Frequent headaches or migraines
- Clicking, popping, or locking of the jaw
- Ear ringing, congestion, or pressure
- Vertigo or dizziness
- Neck and shoulder tension
- Difficulty finding a comfortable bite

These are not symptoms you have to live with. A bite guard can be helpful, but it is often just the first step, not the final answer. If the underlying cause of your TMJ disorder is related to jaw position, muscle dysfunction, or joint instability, a standard appliance

alone is unlikely to resolve the problem. However, with proper diagnosis and a more advanced approach, it is possible to not only relieve pain, but restore comfort, function, and quality of life. If you're still searching for answers, please know that there is predictable help and relief with more advanced techniques and technology.

Jeffrey S. Haddad, DDS of Rochester Advanced Dentistry, completed his dental education at the University of Michigan in 2001. Dr. Haddad is a fellow of the prestigious Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies. He lectures nationally on cosmetic dentistry, TMJ and sleep disorders and dental implants. For more information, visit www.rochesteradvanceddentistry.com.



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