

## Repeat Timer Exercise to Stop Daytime Clenching and Grinding

### The Problem

Habitual clenching (or grinding) of your teeth can cause a variety of problems associated with your jaws and teeth. It can overtax your muscles and cause pain just as muscle aches and pains occur after working too hard at any repetitive, physically demanding task. Clenching and grinding can also overstress your teeth which can cause pain in periodontal ligaments and wearing down of the dental enamel. Some patients have broken teeth by forceful and repetitive clenching and grinding. Clenching and grinding can also overstress and cause pain and damage to the complicated structure of the temporomandibular joint.

Clenching and grinding can occur during the day or night. Daytime clenching often occurs during stressful situations which once begun, frequently becomes habitual. Then it can occur in a range of situations; for example, when you are concentrating, exerting yourself physically, or driving. Clenching and grinding can also occur at night. The forces exerted during nighttime bruxism can be very intense, often resulting in tooth wear and muscle soreness on awakening. The technique described below is for changing your daytime clenching and grinding habit.

Most people are not aware that they clench or grind their teeth and learn about their habit from their significant other or by a dentist who notices tooth wear or highly developed jaw-closing muscles. Because this habit can contribute to pain and structural damage, it is important to become aware of the habit and to reduce it. The first step is *awareness*, which includes; 1.) Discovering those situations where you are more likely to clench or brux. 2.) Becoming more sensitive to increases in muscle tension in your jaw (and in other parts of your body). Learning when and where you engage in this habit is important to begin effectively changing it. The second step is *to change* the position of our jaws when you discover yourself clenching or grinding in order to develop a new habit of holding your jaws in a relaxed position.

Although it sounds simple, do not underestimate the effort involved in making a change in a strong habit. It is very easy to become absorbed in tasks and forget what you are doing with your face and jaw. We tend to lose awareness of any constant sensations, including muscle tension. For example, you are probably not aware of the feel of our foot in your shoe or your shirt or blouse on your arm. But you can become aware of these sensations if you direct your attention to the area. Using a repeat timer is a way of helping you learn to direct your attention to your jaws in order to become aware of an area you once paid little attention. Then you are in a position to change a destructive habit.

## The Procedure

### 1. The Timer

A “repeat timer” is any device that can be set for a number of minutes and provide an alarm or sound to alert you that the time period has ended. A cell phone, a computer desktop timer, or even a kitchen timer which can be adjusted for time periods for one to sixty minutes will work fine. Inexpensive digital commercial timers are also available.

### 2. Set the timer for 15 minutes

3. When the timer goes off, first check the position of your jaws and teeth. Notice whether they are together and or if you can feel any muscle tension. Some people tense their muscles even without their teeth contacting. If you are learning progressive muscle relaxing training, this will help sensitize you to whether you have tension in your jaw muscles or not.

4. If you are clenching your teeth and/or tense, separate your teeth and relax the muscles of your jaw. If you have been given exercises for loosening your jaw muscles from your physical therapist, now is a good time to perform them (or any other strategies such as imagery) to relax your jaws. If can relax your whole body significantly, this will also help reduce the tension in your facial muscles as well.

5. Set the timer for another 15 minutes.

6. When you find that you were not tense and not clenching during three signals from the timer in a row, then set the timer for 20 minutes. Continue with the same checking and relaxing procedure. After three times without clenching or tension in a row, then begin setting the timer for 25 minutes etc which will gradually increase the time between checks as you begin to decrease your clenching and tension.

7. There are two alternatives for using the above procedure. You can begin using the timer as soon as you awaken and continue throughout the day. You will learn more quickly when and where you are clenching which will help you to make more comprehensive changes in you habit. Alternatively, you can select one setting or situation and begin the time (e.g., at work between 9:00 and 12:00, while watching television in the evening, while doing housework, while driving to and from work). Gradually other settings or situations can be added until you eventually monitor yourself throughout the day.

Once you have become more sensitive to the onset of tension and can stop it before you clench, you will then be able to more successfully monitor our behavior in new situations. Then you may be able to stop yourself from clenching at times and places where you have not even begun to monitor tension.

Finally be patient with yourself. Recognizing that this monitoring and behavior change may take weeks to change a habit developed over the years, can help you to persevere and not give up on the process. If you should find yourself clenching again after you thought that you had broken the habit, please recognize that a new situation, new stressors, new demands, or some change in circumstances are likely related to a renewal of clenching.