

Are your sleeping habits making you ill?

Matthew Houlton from the Manor House Dental Practice, a long established York practice, is here to answer some common questions about common causes. This month...



My partner snores. It's affecting my sleep and now we're both tired and irritable all the time. What can be done to stop it?

Snoring not only interferes with a good night's sleep but also with your general quality of life. During sleep, the muscles of the tongue and jaw relax and fall back against the back of the throat. Partial blockage results in snoring, but temporary complete blockage causes the more serious Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA). This can lead to poor sleep patterns, daytime drowsiness (with associated risks when driving or operating machinery), headaches, high blood pressure, risk of heart problems and stroke. Partners are often affected by it too, which can cause strain on their relationship.

Options for treatment include methods to open the airway. The more severe cases of sleep apnoea require specialist medical treatment, but for mild to moderate conditions of sleep apnoea and snoring a dental device called a Mandibular Advancement Appliance (MAA) can work very well. It is similar to a gum-shield and holds the lower jaw and tongue forwards thus opening up the airway to allow unrestricted breathing. These can be provided by a dentist and have been proven to work very well.

There are various factors which aggravate snoring including alcohol, being overweight, sleeping on your back and mouth breathing (having difficulty breathing through your nose). Addressing these factors can help. Treating snoring and especially sleep apnoea properly can also help to improve the quality of one's sleep and the quality of life for all concerned, and may work better than a quick elbow in the ribs!

■ To find out more contact the British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association at www.britishsnoring.co.uk

I wake up with headaches every day and my jaws ache. I have also noticed that I keep breaking my fillings. What's happening to me?

Regular clenching and grinding of the teeth (also known as bruxism) or even just holding tension in the jaw muscles can lead to muscle spasms in the jaw. This can lead to jaw ache and headaches, in the morning or throughout the day. About 90 % of the population brux at some time or another in their lives, mostly during their sleep.

Bruxism puts far more force through the muscles of the jaw than needed, for prolonged periods of time. This can put excessive strain on the jaw joints, teeth and gums. It can lead to localised pain in the jaw joints, excessive tooth wear, sensitive teeth, and can even make the teeth loose. Sometimes this excessive force can lead to teeth or fillings breaking requiring costly replacements. It can be triggered by stress or by poor occlusion (the way the teeth meet together).

A simple solution is a splint, a dental device that fits over the lower teeth (or occasionally the upper teeth), usually worn at night. There are two main types: A soft splint (similar to a gum shield) which just acts as a shock absorber but does little to stop the trigger for bruxism. Or, a Centric Relation Appliance is a custom made appliance that creates even bite contacts to allow smooth jaw functioning in harmony with the jaw joints. This will help relax the muscles and help alleviate the symptoms. Both types of splint can be provided by a dentist.

■ To find out more contact the British Society of Occlusal Studies at www.bsos.org.uk.

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■ The Manor House Dental Practice combines a relaxed, friendly environment with the latest in dental technology. They offer a range of services, from the prevention and treatment of gum disease to smile makeovers and cosmetic procedures.

12 Boroughbridge Road, YO26 5RU, call 797434
www.manorhousedentalpractice.co.uk