



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 26, 2010

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Open Wide...But Don't Say "Ow"

In our fast-paced lives, many of us may be eating in a hurry, eating oversized foods, and taking bigger bites than ever before. Many fast food chains and restaurants now showcase super-sized burgers and over-stacked sandwiches in flashy advertisements. While impressive to behold, they won't just stretch your stomach—they can impact your oral health by stretching your jaw muscles, as well, according to the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS).

“Opening your mouth too wide, while not usually a problem for most people, can become problematic if you have any temporomandibular joint, or TMJ, dysfunction,” says MDS member Mary Jane Hanlon, DMD, a general dentist who practices in Lexington.

The temporomandibular joint connects the lower jaw to the skull. Opening your mouth wider than is comfortable can lead to soreness in the joint, as well as the inability to be able to open your mouth very wide or close your mouth all the way. The ligaments can become overstretched if the mouth opens too wide, allowing the joint to become misplaced. This can occur from eating foods such as extra-large hamburgers, sandwiches, and even large ice cream cones.

If you feel as if your jaw is out of position from taking an oversized bite, it's best to remain calm. Contact your dentist, or try an easy home remedy.

“You can apply warm compresses to the side affected, and it will relax the muscles,” says Dr. Hanlon. “You should be able to get the jaw back in its proper place within 30 minutes. If you are unsuccessful in that time, you should see your dentist.”

Cutting your food into smaller, more manageable bites and avoiding opening your mouth wide to take full bites of extra-large food items can help alleviate jaw issues. So before you chow down on that triple-stacked burger or extra-large sub, you might want to make sure you're not biting off more than you can chew.

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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is a 5,000-member professional association and statewide constituent of the American Dental Association. Established in 1864, the MDS is an organization dedicated to improving the oral health of the public in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and also advancing the professional development of its membership through initiatives in education, advocacy, and promotion of the highest professional standards.