

Teaching Doctors

Easing Pain: Solutions from the Michigan Head & Neck Institute



While conducting his pain research, Dr. Richard Klein found that two head and neck conditions are the sources or exacerbators of many patients' pain, creating additional problems throughout the body. Sleep apnea — which deprives an individual of deep, consistent sleep — denies cells enough oxygen. "When you can't sleep well, your body aches because of it. People with sleep apnea also have more instances of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease, as well as more overall body pain than those who don't," Dr. Klein says. In addition, memory problems, depression, headaches, and irritability can result.

To determine if patients are suffering from sleep apnea, Dr. Klein first asks: Do you snore? Does your sleep partner tell you that, while snoring, you seem to stop breathing for a period of a few seconds or more, followed by a moment of gasping for air? This is often an indicator of sleep apnea, and an individual who experiences this type of episode should be tested by a sleep professional. Sleep apnea claims the lives of more than 200,000 Americans each year.

TMJ dysfunction also creates head and neck pain for many people. It's often caused by a slip or fall or an accident — and sometimes it's due to an event that happened in early childhood and has long since been forgotten. TMJ is aggravated by stress, such as the continuous economic stress this region has been experiencing. TMJ happens when the jaw, or the tissues that support it, is out of alignment with connecting bones in the head.

To find out whether TMJ dysfunction could be present, Dr. Klein begins by asking patients: Do you have headaches? A pain in your jaw? Do you hear a click when you open your mouth to eat or to chew? Do you grind

your teeth? Do you have ear pain, dizziness, or ringing of the ears? Do your eyes hurt or do you have occasional blurriness? These are only some of the symptoms of TMJ dysfunction.

Both TMJ and sleep apnea are readily treatable at the Michigan Head & Neck Institute. TMJ can often be cured or controlled with medication and physical therapy, if it's caught early. In more advanced cases, a mouthpiece can be worn at night to reposition the jaw. The mouthpiece is small and inconspicuous, and travels well. Sleep apnea patients can also be fitted with a special mouthpiece that eliminates the need for bulky masks that many people find claustrophobic and uncomfortable. Patients are encouraged to ask whether their medical insurance covers the cost of a mouthpiece.

Dr. Richard Klein set out to become an expert on pain more than a decade ago — about the time he was seriously injured in an auto accident. His head and neck pain was so wretched, he knew that if he didn't conquer it, it would conquer him. Eventually the depth of his pain knowledge grew so vast, physicians around the world looked to him for answers.

In Singapore, at the National University ... at the Medical College of Beijing ... at the Prince Phillips Hospital in Hong Kong ... and in Jakarta, Montreal, Brazil, Argentina, and Panama, Dr. Klein provided solutions. Likewise, he shared his insight with doctors here at home, who work in the Beaumont, Henry Ford, St. John, Botsford, and other hospital systems. For his work in the field, he has been given the key to the city of Dayton, Ohio; he's been honored with executive declarations from

Michigan Govs. Milliken, Blanchard, and Granholm; he's been awarded a fellowship in the Royal Society of Health in London, England; and much more.

Then Dr. Klein became afflicted with cancer — and he once again went to work to find new ways to stop the aching and reduce cellular inflammation.

As clinical investigator for the FDA on soft-tissue use of the laser, Dr. Klein found that inflamed cells become more normal when lasers are used in healing treatments. Lasers help to relax the cellular structure in muscles, calming spasms. They're an integral part of Dr. Klein's patient therapy programs.

There's a wonderful side benefit to relieving one's TMJ or sleep apnea. Often, constant pain makes people edgy, or "difficult" to live with. "We look forward to seeing people return to their naturally pleasant selves once the pain goes away," says Dr. Klein, who has been named one of Hour Detroit's Top Docs. "While this may seem to be a small thing, some things are important enough that they're not small things!"

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