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## Opinion: Taking antidepressants? Pay attention to the jaw

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July 11, 2023



Bottles of antidepressant pills sit on a shelf.

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There have been numerous accounts of increased anxiety and depression in our society. Some say it was caused by the pandemic. Others say it is caused by any number of other societal issues. The result has been an increase in people seeking relief, and that often means medications.

Many medications used to treat anxiety and depression increase serotonin. They help the patient feel better, but the increase in serotonin can then mask some types of physical pain that should be addressed.

Pain from a mechanical problem in the jaw is one example. Sometimes it is not until a significant injury from an accident that the patient seeks a remedy for jaw misalignment, when discomfort from the jaw overrides the dulled pain threshold.

Serotonin in the central nervous system is a neurotransmitter and modulator, helping to regulate a number of physiological functions, including pain sensation, cognition and certain emotions, including anxiety and depression.

As a result, those using some form of serotonin to combat anxiety or depression need to be particularly aware of physical pain that may result from old or even recent physical trauma.

Some common examples include jaw trauma from deployment of a motor vehicle air bag, injury when the chin bangs into the steering wheel, missing a step on a ladder and catching it with the chin, biting into a hard foreign object smuggled accidentally in a piece of food and, of course, contact sports injuries.

A simple way to determine if there may be jaw injury, even before pain becomes sharply noticeable, is to see if the jaw shifts to the side on opening and “snaps.” Is there a “clicking” sound when the jaw is opened wide?

Some medicines, including antidepressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) also can cause a condition called bruxism, more commonly known as teeth grinding. The most common cause, of course, is stress and anxiety.

Bruxism as a result of taking certain antidepressants typically shows up within two or three weeks of taking the medication for the first time and has been seen to be associated with taking fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), or venlafaxine.

These and similar drugs function by slightly altering brain chemistry with the result often being an involuntarily jaw clenching and jaw clenching is hard on all parts of the jaw system.

Bruxism, therefore, is both a medical and a dental problem and may be related, as well, to genetics, lifestyle, vitamin deficiency and a host of other issues in addition to medications.

Is it time to stop taking the antidepressants if jaw problems can result?

No. Rather, it is time to treat jaw issues before pain itself becomes pronounced. Perhaps surprisingly, the problem might even be helped with vitamin D supplements or perhaps magnesium rich foods to help the jaw relax.

The real answer, of course, is not to self-diagnose. And not to wait until the problem becomes severe.

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