

Athletes and the Arts: Dental Health and Musicians



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As a musician, your body is your most important instrument, but for horn, reed and some string players, as well as vocalists, your teeth are a vital tool. Seeing your dentist regularly is the best way to prevent, detect early, and treat various dental problems.

Unhealthy habits, such as smoking cigarettes or using smokeless tobacco products can cause dental health problems, including cancer of the mouth and throat.

Be sure your dentist knows you are a musician and consider bringing your mouthpiece along to your visit so that you can demonstrate what you do.

DENTAL CONCERNS SPECIFIC TO INSTRUMENT GROUPS:

- **Brass:** Teeth grinding and problems with the joints connecting the jaw to the skull (temporomandibular joint or TMJ), are common. There is increased incidence of teeth grinding and TMJ clicking, known as crepitus, in trombone and tuba players, compared to others. Dry lips and calluses on upper lips also are common.
- **Single reed:** Most of the weight and pressure is on the lower jaw, which can cause the biting surface of your lower teeth to wear away and/or chip.
- **Double reed:** If your teeth are already too close together, there is increased risk for pain, mouth sores, and the reed can cause calluses on your lips. The increased pressure in the mouth may increase the risk of infection within the ducts that release saliva.
- **Violin and viola:** Pressure from holding the instrument between your shoulder and jaw often causes musicians to clench their teeth, causing pain in the cheek muscles on both sides of the face, TMJ or even cracking molars.

GENERAL ISSUES:

- **Alignment of teeth:** If you play wind instruments you have a greater chance of the position of your teeth being shifted than musicians who play other types of instruments. This is because the pressure of your muscles on your teeth when playing is greater than that to keep your teeth in their natural position.
- **Soft tissue damage:** Those who play wind instruments may have lip and cheek discomfort. If you have braces that cause pain when playing, place a piece of orthodontic wax on the braces where they are rubbing your cheek or lip. Ask your orthodontist to show you how to use this wax.
- **Focal Dystonia (“occupational cramp”):** Cramping of key muscles used repeatedly in playing your instrument can occur. When it affects the muscles of lips and mouth, this can cause trouble controlling pitch and tone. It may be stress related or due to positioning of you or your instrument.
- **Dental prostheses (splints, lip shields, partial & full dentures):** Wearing devices, such as partial or full dentures when practicing and playing may cause you to develop mouth sores. Using mouth splints or lip shields when playing may damage the muscles needed for fine control of your lips and mouth.
- **Dry mouth:** Playing wind instruments increases production of saliva, nervousness and performance anxiety may result in dry mouth. Limiting intake of caffeine and alcohol, as well as not smoking can reduce your chance of developing dry mouth.
- **Tooth sensitivity:** If you have teeth that are sensitive to cold, the frequent inhaling of air while playing may make this worse. There are toothpastes available that may help to decrease the sensitivity of your teeth.

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ATHLETES AND THE ARTS - Integrating the science of sport and the performing arts for mutual benefit.

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