

Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction (TMJ)

The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) works like a sliding hinge that connects the skull to the jawbone. The TMJ is basically the jaw bone joint. These disorders can cause a great deal of pain in the muscles controlling joint movement and the jaw joint itself. The reasoning why someone gets TMJ is often hard to determine. The pain might be a combination of different problems, such as a jaw injury or arthritis. Some of those who have jaw pain also tend to grind their teeth or clench down when sleeping. However, there are many people who habitually clench their teeth and never go on to develop this disorder.

In the majority of cases, the discomfort and pain associated with the disorder can easily be alleviated with nonsurgical treatments and self-care. Severe disorders might have to be surgically repaired.

What Causes TMJ Pain?

- Repetitive stress on the jaw, such as repeated heavy biting
- Osteoarthritis of the TMJ. Yes, the TMJ can suffer with osteoarthritis like many other joints
- Grinding your teeth at night
- Dental problems with the teeth
- Stress (causing repeated jaw clenching)
- Trauma, such as a broken jaw or a punch to the jaw bone

What are the Symptoms of TMJ Pain?

- Jaw pain
- Pain on eating or chewing
- Pain yawning or opening your mouth widely
- Pain radiating to the neck
- Headaches or migraines
- Painful click of the jaw

Temporomandibular Joint Disorder (TMJ) Anatomy

The TMJ is the jaw bone joint, and you can feel it by placing your fingers just below your ear and opening and shutting your mouth. The temporomandibular joint is one that allows a series of complex movements that are required for eating, yawning, talking and swallowing.

There is a disc between the joint, and this acts similar to a disc in your spine – to provide cushioning and protection to the joint, and allow movement.

When the joint becomes dysfunctional, it can cause limitations in your lifestyle and severe pain. Disorders are quite common and those who suffer with the condition will end up seeking treatment and advice. Understanding what you are dealing with can help you receive the appropriate treatment to overcome your condition.

I Get a Click in My Jaw – is This Normal?

It is not particularly common, but it's not abnormal either. The jaw is a mobile joint so will click and crack a little. It is just that most people do not notice it until they get pain. If your click or crack is repeatable, and without pain, the best thing you can do is to try not to deliberately click your jaw and forget about it. If the click is painful, you need to seek medical attention as this is a sign of TMJ dysfunction. The problem

is that if you have pain, you then become “aware” of the click which may have been present all along, but the patient just never noticed it.

I Saw My Dentist, but They cannot Help, What Should I do?

Dentists are teeth experts, but many do not specialize in jaw problems. You should seek a dentist with specialist expertise in jaw related pain, or TMJ dysfunction. An alternative would be to seek an osteopath or chiropractor, many of whom have experience in the treatment of jaw pain. They may use alignment techniques, massage, traction or mobilization to improve the function of the joint.

How to Treat Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction:

1. Medication

Medication can help to relieve the pain commonly associated with this disorder. Some of the common medications include:

- Pain relievers can help to relieve pain.
- Tricyclic antidepressants are often used for depression, but they work well for pain relief.
- Muscle relaxers are often used for the first few weeks or days to help relieve pain from the disorder.
- Sedatives can help when nighttime teeth clenching seems to be aggravating your pain.

2. Therapies

Common non-pharmaceutical treatments for the disorder are:

- Bite guards allow those who are suffering with pain in the jaw to benefit from this device. It is inserted over the teeth while the individual sleeps.
- Physical therapy, such as ice, heat and ultrasound, and exercises for strengthening and stretching the jaw muscles has proven beneficial.
- Counseling can help you to understand what behaviors and factors are aggravating your pain, so that way you can work to avoid them. Common examples include biting your fingernails, leaning on your chin and clenching or grinding your teeth.

3. Injections

In certain people, corticosteroid injections have proven helpful. On rare occasions, Botox injections into the muscles that are used for chewing has helped to relieve pain commonly associated with this disorder.

Tips:

- Eat soft foods. Cut your food into smaller pieces. Avoid sticky and chewy foods. Don't chew gum.
- You might be provided with a series of exercises to help strengthen and stretch the muscles in the jaw, as well as massage them.
- Apply an ice pack to the affected area for 5-10 minutes at a time three to five times per day to help relieve pain and inflammation.
- Some people have found relief from acupuncture.
- Slow your breathing, take deep breaths and relax to help relax tense muscles in the jaw and reduce pain.