



TMJ and Jaw pain

Where is the Temporo-Mandibular Joint (TMJ)?

You can locate this joint by putting your finger on the triangular structure in front of your ear. Then move your finger just slightly forward and press firmly while you open your jaw all the way and close it. You can also feel the joint motion in your ear canal.

How does the TMJ work?

When you bite down hard, you put force on the object between your teeth and on the joint. In terms of physics, the jaw is the lever and the TMJ is the fulcrum. In addition, several muscles contribute to opening and closing the jaw and aid in the function of the TMJ. These muscles run along the side of the face and head.

What causes TMJ pain?

In some patients, pain associated with the TMJ is a result of displacement of the cartilage disc that causes pressure and stretching of the associated sensory nerves. In addition, the chewing muscles may become inflamed and even spasm, causing intense pain and tenderness. Clenching the jaw or grinding the teeth at night (bruxism) can also put strain on the TMJ and jaw muscles leading to inflammation and pain.

What are the symptoms?

Ear pain, sore jaw muscles, temple/cheek pain, jaw popping/clicking, locking of the jaw, difficulty in opening the mouth fully, frequent head/neck aches.

The pain may be sharp and searing, or may be dull and constant. Pain can occur over the joint, immediately in front of the ear, but can also radiate elsewhere. It often causes spasms in the adjacent muscles that are attached to the bones of the skull, face, and jaws. Then pain can be felt at the side of the head (the temple), the cheek, the lower jaw, and the teeth.

How is TMJ / jaw pain treated?

Because TMJ symptoms often develop in the head and neck, otolaryngologists are appropriately qualified to diagnose TMJ problems. Proper diagnosis of TMJ begins with a detailed history and physical, including careful assessment of the teeth occlusion and function of the jaw joints and muscles. An early diagnosis will likely respond to simple, self-remedies:

- Rest the muscles and joints by eating soft foods
- Do not chew gum
- Avoid clenching or tensing the jaw
- Relax muscles of the jaw with moist heat (1/2 hour at least twice daily) and gentle massage
- You may try an over-the-counter mouthguard at night (The Doctor's[®] NightGuard™ or similar)

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