

TMJ INFORMATION

The jaw meets the upper skull in front of the ear at a joint. This joint that connects them is called the Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ). A small disc of cartilage separates the bones, much like in the knee joint, so that the mandible may slide easily; each time you chew you move it. But you also move it every time you talk and each time you swallow. It is one of the most frequently used joints of the body and one of the most complex.

Like any joint (hip, shoulder, wrist) the TMJ can be strained or injured. When the joint becomes injured we call it TMD (Temporomandibular Disorder). Injury can be the result of a specific trauma to the jaw area or can result from prolonged micro-trauma from oral habits. Once a joint is strained, it can be easily re-injured.

How Does TMD Feel?

You may experience ear pain, sore jaw muscles, temple/cheek pain, jaw popping/clicking, locking of the jaw, difficulty in opening the mouth fully, and frequent head/neck aches.

What Can Be Done for TMD?

1. Apply moist heat for 20 minutes two to four times each day to the painful area. Alternate with ice for 10 minutes two to four times each day. Heat and/or ice can reduce joint or muscle inflammation and relax the muscles.
2. Eat a softer diet. Avoid hard and chewy foods such as bagels or steak. Cut food into small pieces. Chew with your back teeth rather than biting with your front teeth and chew on both sides at the same time to reduce strain on one side. **DO NOT CHEW GUM!**
3. Tongue up and teeth apart – The teeth should never be touching (except occasionally they touch lightly with swallowing). We suggest that you closely monitor your jaw position during the day so that you maintain your jaw in a relaxed comfortable position. This involves placing the tongue lightly on the top of your mouth behind your upper front teeth, allowing the teeth to come apart and relaxing the jaw muscles. Especially do this when yawning to reduce the amount you open.
4. Avoid Caffeine – Caffeine is a “muscle contracture” drug and can make your muscles tighter. Caffeine or caffeine like drugs are in coffee, tea, soda, and chocolate.
5. Avoid oral habits that put strain on the jaw muscles and joints: These include teeth clenching, teeth grinding, teeth touching or resting together, biting cheeks, tongue pushing against teeth, jaw tensing or other habits. Avoid resting your jaw on your hand.
6. Avoid activities which involved wide opening of the jaw (yawning, prolonged dental treatments, etc.) for a period of time until the pain has been reduced.
7. Avoid sleeping on your stomach since this puts adverse pressure on the jaw and neck muscles.
8. Use anti-inflammatory and pain reducing medications like Ibuprofen (Advil) and acetaminophen (Tylenol) to reduce joint and muscle inflammation and pain.

TMD is not a life threatening situation, even though it can be very uncomfortable. Injury to the TMJ and jaw muscles is extremely common and joint noises, clicks, pops, and locking of the jaw are also not uncommon. Most often these symptoms will improve over time. Changing habits, relaxing the area and avoiding additional strain or injury will speed up your recovery considerably. For extreme cases a referral to a TMD specialist may be necessary.