

TMJ Disorders

What is TMJ?

TMJ stands for temporomandibular joint. This joint acts on the right and left side and allows for the mouth to open and close as well as to chew food. This joint is very similar to the rest of the joints in the body, except that it is located on your head. Therefore, it too can be injured and cause pain. Like other joints, the TMJ has muscles which move the jaw, ligaments that restrain abnormal movement, a capsule to support the joint and maintain nutrition to the joint, and a disc to keep the joint in place and allow ease of movement.

What are the causes of TMJ?

There is still some debate regarding all of the causes of TMJ disorders. Some times there is direct trauma to the jaw itself; this may be immediate pains or pain much later in life. Much evidence supports the theory of excessive tension on the joint. These individuals are called teeth clenchers and grinders or posses increased tension/stress. Some evidence suggests that there are some postural influences.

What are the symptoms of TMJ?

Some individuals may be asymptomatic. Often individuals report a catch or click when they open and close their mouth or when eating. Others describe their jaw as being out of joint and having difficulty moving their jaw. Most often people just complain of pain around both or one jaw or to the sides of their head.

How is TMJ disorders treated?

First and foremost an orthodontist or dentist should evaluate you and determine if biomechanically you would benefit from an intra-oral appliance or splint. These appliances help with occlusion (alignment) to keep your joint stable. Physical Therapy could assist in identifying and treating other predisposing factors such as tight muscles, restricted joints, postural influences, and restoring symmetry between joints. Lastly, Physical Therapists can give you the tools to prevent or reduce the reoccurrences of this syndrome. Together your Dentist and Physical Therapist can provide you with a holistic intervention to reduce your symptoms and improve your health and function of your jaw.

What might I expect from a Physical Therapy session?

After the evaluation and a determination of the causes the physical therapist may elect to do a number of different techniques. Ultrasound is a form of deep heat used to relax the muscles around the joint. Manual mobilization of the jaw is used when your jaw is “stuck” or doesn’t move as efficiently as it should. More often than not, there is some cervical issues related to posture or tension that can be alleviated through massage, strengthening, or stretching and therefore reduce biomechanical faults. Specific strengthening exercises can stabilize the jaw and improve the efficacy of the joint. Lastly, your physical therapist will provide you with home activities.

What can I do for TMJ Dysfunction?

There are several useful tips for reducing symptoms of TMJ. Often understanding and correcting the causes can reduce the overload applied to the joint. Depending on the severity of your condition, it is often useful to avoid chewing tough foods and gum.

One useful TMJ mnemonic is RTTPB

- R** relaxation: Excessive external and internal tension creates stress on the joint. Try positioning yourself in a comfortable upright posture and say the “Emma” several times.
- T** teeth apart: Making sure your teeth are not touching themselves reduces the possible effects of grinding and clenching which place high loads on your joints.
- T** tongue up: With your tongue on the roof of your mouth your jaw is in the most ideal/resting position. This is similar to other joints where if you alter the position of the joint you can reduce aberrant forces on it.
- P** posture: This is one of the most important tips. Faulty cervical posture increases tension on the joint. In addition, it results in increased forces required to move the joint. Lastly it can compress several nerves resulting in pain, weakness, headache, and reduced mobility.
- B** breathing: While it is true that you are breathing, you may not be recruiting the most ideal muscles to do so. Breathing from the diaphragm and not the neck muscles allows for more relaxation.

Another useful and similar TMJ mnemonic is TUTALP. This mnemonic is useful for remembering how to relax your jaw throughout the day.

Tongue Up, Teeth Apart, Lips Closed

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