

Maxillofacial Department

Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction (TMD)

What is the temporomandibular joint?

The temporomandibular joint (jaw joint) is located just in front of the ear, where the skull and lower jaw (mandible) meet.

What is Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction (TMD)?

TMD is a common condition which affects a large number of people. In this condition, adverse stress on the jaw joint causes pain and discomfort in the joint itself and/or in the muscles and ligaments around the joint. This is often made worse by chewing or opening your mouth wide.

Sometimes discomfort can be worse in the morning, especially if you have a clenching or grinding habit. You may experience noises from the jaw joint such as clicking, cracking or a crunching/grinding noise.

How am I stressing my jaw joint?

A common cause is over-use of the jaw through clenching and grinding habits which often occur during sleep. These habits occur more frequently during times of stress and you may be completely unaware of them.

Occasionally some people can even clench their teeth during the day, especially when performing stressful activities such as driving in traffic. Chewing gum, pen tops or nail biting are other ways in which the jaw can be over-used.

Errors in your bite (malocclusion) can also create adverse stress in the joints by forcing the joint into an abnormal position.



Why have I got pain in my jaw joint?

Abnormal forces on the jaw joint may lead to disruption of the normal anatomy with displacement of the cartilage. This can result in clicking or locking.

The muscles surrounding the jaw may ache or can go into spasm, causing pain which may spread to the head or neck. If you have been under stress, clenching or grinding habits may become more frequent, making jaw pain more likely.

What can I do about my TMD?

If your jaw is being stressed at night, you need to do as much as possible to rest it during the day:

- **Avoid hard or chewy foods** e.g. crusty bread, toffees. Cut food into small pieces so that less chewing effort is required. Avoid wide opening (e.g. yawning).
- **Painkillers** – anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen can be used for painful episodes.
- **Heat** – a hot water bottle wrapped in a heated towel or a microwave 'wheat-bag' applied to the side of your face is helpful to relax tense muscles.
- **Massage** – your muscles which move the jaw joint can be massaged twice daily to help them relax. Your clinician can show you how to do this.
- **Exercises** – If these are appropriate, your clinician will discuss them with you.
- **Breaking habits** – if you chew gum this must be stopped. Other habits such as nail biting or pen chewing which involve jaw movements must also be stopped.
- **Physiotherapy** – this is provided by a physiotherapist upon prescription.
- **Relaxation techniques** – learning techniques to control tension and stress.
- **Splint therapy** – A plastic splint or brace worn full or part time as required. A mould is taken so that this fits your mouth. It is worn over the upper or lower teeth to compensate for irregularities in the bite and to relieve pressure in the jaw joint. The appliance must be worn as prescribed for a number of months in order to have the desired effect.

Patient Information

- **Steroid injection** into the joint – this is useful in a small number of cases. Your clinician will advise you if this is appropriate.
- **Surgery** – open joint surgery is required in less than 5% of cases.

It is important to remember that jaw joint problems, although inconvenient, are not sinister. The vast majority of cases settle with the use of simple management techniques, over a period of months, as described above.

It is extremely rare for jaw joint problems to progress to arthritis.

Adapted from:

British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. (BOAMS)

Available from, <http://www.baoms.org.uk/>

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