

## **Jaw Problems**

(Also known as TMJ dysfunction)

Jaw pain and problems are increasingly common mostly stemming from the stresses of modern day living. The cause of the problem can be due to:

- Tension within the muscles that support the jaw using from clenching or grinding the teeth.
- 'Malocclusion' - occlusion is another name for the way your teeth meet when your jaws bite together, in turn causing pain and problems with the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) or the muscles that move your jaw. This can happen if you have lost teeth, or have worn teeth through tooth surface loss.
- Gum disease – if teeth are loose, this means that your bite is constantly changing meaning the muscles and ligaments that support your jaw have to readjust and stretch then contract all the time.
- Heavily restored dentition - teeth that are out of line, heavily filled, constantly breaking, fillings that fracture or crowns that work loose may all be signs of occlusal problems. Your teeth may also be tender to bite on or may ache constantly.

## **What is it? (signs)**

Clicking, grinding or pain in your jaw joints, ringing or buzzing in your ears and difficulty in opening or closing your mouth could all be due to your teeth not meeting each other properly.

If your jaw is in the wrong position, the muscles that move the jaw have to work much harder and can get tired. This leads to muscle spasm. The main symptoms are continual headaches or migraine, especially first thing in the morning; pain behind your eyes; sinus pain and pains in your neck and shoulders. Sometimes even back muscles are involved. You may find that you clench your teeth, although most people who do aren't aware of it. Sometimes this can be caused by anxiety, or when concentrating on a task for example; housework, gardening, car mechanics, using a keyboard etc.

You may wake up in the morning with a stiff jaw or tenderness when you bite together. This could be due to clenching or grinding your teeth in your sleep. Most people who grind their teeth do it while they are asleep and may not know they are doing it.

If you suffer from severe headaches, or neck and shoulder pain, you may not have linked this with possible jaw problems. Or you may keep having pain or discomfort on the side of your face around your ears or jaw joints or difficulty in moving your jaw. These are all symptoms of TMJ problems/dysfunction.

If you are missing some teeth at the back of your mouth, this may lead to an unbalanced bite, which can cause uneven pressure on your teeth.

## **What does it look like/what I might a feel (symptoms)**

Many people have imperfect occlusion and missing teeth, yet never have symptoms because they adjust to their problems. Occasionally, in times of increased stress and tension, the symptoms may appear and then go away immediately. Or, your teeth and gums may be affected straight away and, instead of headaches, you may suffer from:

- Flattened, worn teeth
- Broken teeth, fillings and crowns
- Loose teeth
- Continual sensitivity of your teeth to temperature change
- Toothache with no apparent cause

If you think you have any of these problems, ask your dentist.

## **Possible treatment**

See your dentist. They may be able to help you or may refer you to a specialist who deals with occlusal problems.

Depending on the symptoms you are having, it can be possible to spot the signs of an occlusal problem. Various muscles may be sore when tested, or the broken and worn areas of your teeth will show you are grinding your teeth - a common sign of an incorrect bite.

Relaxation: Counselling and relaxation therapy may help in some cases. These techniques help the patient to become more aware of stressful situations and to control tension.

Mouthguard: This is a device made by a dental technician after an impression of your teeth has been taken by a dentist to make a device to fit your teeth and mouth exactly. They are designed to protect the teeth and help prevent the TMJ from clenching and grinding. These are usually worn at night.

Tooth adjustment (equilibration): Your teeth may need to be carefully adjusted to meet evenly. Changing the direction and position of the slopes that guide your teeth together can often help to reposition the jaw.

If your dentist suspects that your symptoms are due to an incorrect bite, they may help to improve the problem by giving you a hard plastic appliance that fits over your upper or lower teeth. This appliance needs to be measured and fitted very accurately so that when you bite on it, all your teeth meet at exactly the same time in a position where your muscles are relaxed. You may have to wear this all the time or just at night. If the appliance relieves your symptoms then your bite may need to be corrected permanently. Relief in some patients is instant, in others it can take a long time. In some cases where the teeth have been worn down, white filling material is bonded to the teeth to help reposition the jaw. This will involve a couple of lengthy appointments in the dental chair and will take about 6 weeks for the jaw to realign and adjust.

Replacement of teeth: The temporomandibular joint needs equal support from both sides of both jaws. The chewing action is designed to work properly only when all your teeth are present and in the correct position. Missing teeth may need to be replaced. This can usually be achieved with either a partial denture or a bridge.

Your dentist will not usually replace missing teeth until they are certain you have occlusal problems.

Will straightening my teeth help?

In some cases, if your teeth are too far out of line or in a totally incorrect bite position, you may need to have an orthodontic appliance (brace) fitted to move them into a better position.

### **What can I do myself to help?**

Taking some anti-inflammatory medication, such as ibuprofen with help to relieve the pain and swelling within the muscles, which will help your jaw relax. Sometimes a mouth guard may be more beneficial especially if grinding or clenching at night.

There are a number of things you can do to improve the function and ease the pain from your jaw pain:

- Massaging your jaw muscles
- Avoid eating hard food or foods that are difficult to chew
- Practicing good posture
- Using hot or cold compresses on your face
- Don't bite your fingernails
- Keep your teeth apart while at rest
- Avoid biting on your front teeth
- Doing exercises to relax your jaw and face

### **Jaw exercises**

The main purpose of jaw exercises is to prevent clicking of your jaw joint and strengthen the muscles which pull your jaw backwards. This will relax the muscles which close your mouth as well as the muscles that pull your jaw forwards and from side to side. Your jaw will act more like a hinge and take the strain off it.

Set aside some time (five to ten minutes) at the beginning and end of the day to do some exercises. Exercises should be done whilst sitting upright. Jaw exercises are designed to strengthen the ligaments around your jaw and relax the muscles that close your mouth.

The following exercises should be carried out twice a day for a week. After this time, do the exercises as often as you can.

- 1) Close your mouth and make sure your teeth are touching. Do not clench your teeth. Rest the tip of your tongue on your palate, just behind your front teeth.
- 2) Run the tip of your tongue backwards towards your soft palate, towards the back of your mouth go as far as it can go keeping your teeth together gently.
- 3) Keeping your tongue in this position in contact with your soft palate, open your mouth slowly until your tongue is pulling away. Do not open any further but stay in this position for 5 seconds then close your mouth and relax.
- 4) Repeat this whole procedure slowly but firmly for the next 5 minutes. There shouldn't be any clicks or noises from your jaw if you are performing these exercises correctly. If there is, start the exercise again repositioning until the movements are click free.

After doing the exercises, when you open your mouth you should feel tension in the back your neck and under your chin. The first few times you do the exercises you should look in the mirror and check that your teeth move straight down vertically and do not go off to one side.

You may find these exercises uncomfortable at first and could increase your jaw pain initially. This is only because your jaw isn't used to these movements and will subside over time. After two to three weeks of doing the exercises your muscles will have been retrained and your mouth will open and close without your jaw clicking.

<http://www.dentalhealth.org>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/temporomandibular-disorder-tmd>

Review: June 2023