

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT TEMPOROMANDIBULAR DISORDER

Located on each side of your face, the temporomandibular joints (TMJ) connect your lower jaw to your skull. These joints and their accompanying muscles allow you to open and close your mouth and move your lower jaw from side to side. You can feel these joints by placing your fingers in front of your ears and opening your mouth.



What is temporomandibular disorder?

Temporomandibular disorder (TMD) occurs when the TMJ is damaged or deteriorates or when the muscles surrounding the joint malfunction, causing imbalanced jaw movement. The chronic muscle pain and spasms associated with this condition can often be painful.

What should I know about TMD?

Approximately 5 to 12 percent of people suffer from TMD, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. TMD refers to a variety of conditions affecting the joints, muscles and nerves in the jaw. Read on to learn more about the signs and symptoms associated with TMD.

What causes TMD?

In many cases, the cause of TMD is unknown. However, it may be caused by trauma, such as injury or dislocation, or an improper bite, which affects the chewing muscles.

Stress and its related behaviors, such as clenching the jaw or grinding the teeth, may aggravate the condition. Inflammatory conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, can also cause TMD. The condition appears to be more common in women than men, though there is no consensus as to why.

How do I know if I have TMD?

Those with TMD may experience the following symptoms on one or both sides of the face:

- Jaw pain or soreness that is more prevalent in the morning or late afternoon.
- Jaw pain associated with chewing, biting or yawning.
- Clicking noises when opening and closing the mouth.
- Difficulty opening and closing the mouth.
- Locking or stiffness of the jaw when talking, yawning or eating.
- Tooth sensitivity not associated with dental problems.
- Headaches or neck pain.
- An earache not associated with an ear infection.

If you experience any of these symptoms, talk with your general dentist. He or she can perform an examination, checking the joints and muscles in your jaw for tenderness, clicking, popping or difficulty moving. Depending on the diagnosis, your dentist may refer you to a physician or a specialist.

How is TMD treated?

Many TMD cases can be handled with simple treatments and lifestyle modifications, including:

- Eating soft foods.
- Applying a warm compress over the region of pain.
- Taking non-aspirin pain relievers or using heat packs to manage pain.
- Practicing relaxation, stress relief techniques and good sleep hygiene.

In more severe cases, your dentist may recommend physical therapy (exercises to strengthen the jaw muscles), appliance therapy (a splint, mouthguard or bite plate) or medication (pain relievers, muscle relaxants, anti-inflammatory drugs, antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs).

Is TMD permanent?

TMD is often a cyclical condition that can recur during times of stress. If you have TMD, see your dentist for regular checkups so that he or she can monitor your symptoms and manage your care.