

Take the Bite Out Of Your Jaw Pain

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Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction (TMJ) affects millions of

Americans with treatment options ranging from mouth splints to therapies to surgery. Treatment options vary depending on the cause of injury or the specialist that is sought first for diagnosis. TMJ is a complex disorder that takes into account numerous body systems and biomechanics and can be complicated to treat. Treatment is most effective when all these elements are taken into account.

TMJ is the hinge joint that allows the pivoting motion of opening and closing the jaw. This can be a highly strained jaw due to trauma, stress, genetics, and illness. Trauma can be induced by any outside force physically hitting the jaw, whiplash or repetitive micro-traumas, such as sleeping on your side with pressure sustained to one side of the jaw frequently, forward head posture, and dental procedures. Trauma can change the biomechanics of the jaw where one side of the jaw may open more or less than the other side, or one side may start opening before or after the other side when both of these actions should occur in unison. Depending on the force of the trauma, the small disc within the TMJ joint can be shifted, which will cause a popping or clicking to develop in the jaw. This can eventually lead to a risk of joint locking.

Mental and physical stress is a major factor in the incidence of TMJ. Daily stress to the jaw includes grinding, clenching, nail biting and eating hard or chewy foods frequently. It could also be related to untreated imbalances in joint motion and upper neck and jaw muscle asymmetry usually from whiplash type injuries. Daily stress is a causal factor for inflammation within the joint of the TMJ. Genetic factors involving overbites or congenital anomalies also contribute greatly to TMJ disorders and are a cause for continual weakening within the joint allowing for a higher risk of injury.

An often overlooked cause to TMJ problems is infections. Infections within the ear canal, mouth or sinus's can play a big role for triggering TMJ problems. Sinus and ear drainage are in close proximity to the TMJ, which during an infection becomes very inflamed and can put pressure on the TMJ joint and keep fluid from draining naturally into the lymphatic system. This pressure can be enough to change the biomechanics of the joint itself, or the infection can affect the nerves associated with the TMJ and surrounding tissues creating either weakness or spasm on unilaterally. This same process can also occur in individuals suffering from allergies.

When there are numerous factors to TMJ, how can you know what is causing your jaw pain? Look closely at your symptoms. Do you have any popping, clicking, or locking? If so there needs to be a biomechanical correction to your TMJ. Trigger points or tightness in the muscles around the jaw and upper neck is usually noted in the beginning of TMJ disorders and shows there is stress within the TMJ and surrounding tissues. With joint imbalances including the soft tissue around the TMJ, a Chiropractor may be a good option, followed by a Massage Therapist or Physical Therapist for soft tissue correction. Getting fitted for a bite guard from your dentist can be very important for allowing minimal stress on the jaw especially if grinding or clenching habits are suspected. If you are having facial pain, tooth or gum pain, and/or headaches, there may be inflammation of the nerves either around the jaw, face or upper neck. In this case, visit your primary care physician to see if there is an infection and have them check to see if it is viral or bacterial. This is the key time to get correction in the biomechanics of the TMJ before it becomes a more complicated disorder.

TMJ can be a life changing disorder. It can cause you pain with eating, smiling or sleeping. It can also be an underlying cause to several hard to treat conditions such as chronic headaches, sinus infections, ear infections and many others. If you suspect that you may have TMJ, don't wait. You deserve to feel good and get on the right track to being healthier.