

A Wide-open Look at TMJ Disorder



Unfortunately, more than 10 million people in the United States alone suffer damage, pain or discomfort related to the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), and the vast majority of them are women. You actually have two of these joints, one on either side of your head, connecting the mandible (or lower jaw) to your skull. Given that you use these joints for chewing and even swallowing food and talking, it's vital that the cartilage and muscles associated with the TMJ are in great working order.

TMJ disorder, with a variety of causes and symptoms, is not always easily understood. Physical trauma to the jaw or surrounding muscles caused by a blow to the face, or inflammation from osteoarthritis, may cause the disorder. Emotional stress and anxiety causing one to grind or clench the teeth can also be a factor. Even a common activity such as chewing gum can exacerbate the condition. Symptoms vary depending on the individual but include:

- Pain in the jaw or neck;
- Swelling on the sides of the face;
- Clicking or popping noises;
- Restricted movement of the jaw;
- Headaches;
- Dizziness; and
- Ear/hearing complaints.

Dentists and physicians treat TMJ disorder with a number of methods including anti-inflammatory medications, biteplates, night guards and, in difficult cases, surgery. But before going to such lengths many advise a physical therapy program as a first option. **The main goal of physical therapy when treating TMJ disorder is to decrease pain and uncomfortable symptoms by decreasing muscle irritability and inflammation in the jaw area and helping to restore movement.** We can design a program that includes pain modulation, strengthening and stretching exercises, improvements in standing, sitting and sleeping postures, and behavior modifications like avoiding gum or chewy foods. With good self-care and physical therapy, we can often help you deal with this disorder leading to a more comfortable lifestyle.