

Temporomandibular (Jaw) Joint Problems

What is it?






To give it its full name, it is Temporomandibular Joint Pain Dysfunction Syndrome. If that's not bad enough, it can also be called Temporomandibular Joint Arthromyalgia, Facial Arthromyalgia or Myofascial Pain Syndrome. As the short name implies, it is not a disease but a condition where the bones, muscles, cartilages and ligaments of the joint between the jaw and the base of the skull are not working correctly.

Symptoms

These are many and varied, but the three most common are pain, a clicking/crunching/cracking noise in the joint or ear, and an inability to open the mouth fully, either always or just occasionally. The pain is usually in front of the ear, in the jaw or in the cheek, but may occur in the temple, the neck or even inside the mouth, such as in the gums or under the tongue.

What Causes it?

There are a number of causes and frequently it is a combination of these rather than one single cause:-

-  There may have been a blow to the jaw, either directly to the joint or elsewhere on the bone.
-  The teeth on each side may not bite together evenly, so that one side of the jaw does not work and puts more stress on the joint structure. Also, your 'bite' may be such that the joint has to work in an unbalanced way.
-  You may have a habit that makes the jaw muscles tire easily and ache. Frequently this is 'subconscious' and you may be unaware of it. It may even occur while you are asleep. These habits include teeth clenching, teeth grinding, abnormal jaw posture or even just tensing up the facial and jaw muscles.
-  You may be under generalised stress. There may be any number of reasons for this which, again, you may not be aware of. Problems with family, spouse, exams, money, work or neighbours are frequent causes, but it could be anything. Anxiety, fear, depression, agitation and tension affect production of chemical messengers in the bloodstream called hormones. These have a number of effects on the body but these include making joints more difficult to move because the joint fluid becomes thicker. For some reason the jaw joint is particularly sensitive. The muscles have to work harder, so they ache. The cartilage inside the joint may even get pulled out of place.
-  Stress is probably the most important factor, but the others may contribute.

How is it treated?

Treatments can be divided into general and specific:-

General

Things that can help include heat and massage to the joint and muscles. Simple painkillers, such as Paracetamol are helpful, especially if the condition is mild. Every effort should be made to make your jaw open and close straight up and down without protruding it as it opens.

Avoid opening the jaw too widely, especially yawning. Avoid chewing excessively and cut tough food into small pieces. Avoid pushing the jaw into strained positions for any length of time.

Specific

Splints

These may be made from soft or hard plastic. Soft splints are used to try to prevent a teeth clenching or grinding habit or to control muscle spasm. Soft splints are made from clear, soft, thin plastic and are rather like gum shields that sports persons wear. Hard splints are similar to braces to straighten the teeth, but without wires, except on the back teeth to keep the splint in. They are often effective when the bite is out of balance or if there is a prominent click in the joint, as it helps to reposition the cartilage inside the joint. If the bite is really unbalanced then teeth may occasionally need to be ground down to correct this. If it is severe, the teeth may need to be moved or surgery may be needed, particularly in the younger patient. If you have dentures these may need to be adjusted or replaced so they fit or bite together better.

Physiotherapy

This can take the form of exercises, manipulation, ultrasound or heat treatment to the joint and/or muscles. It is often effective when the jaw opening pattern needs correcting or if there is painful muscle spasm. It is also very effective if the cause of the problem was an injury.

Medication

This can be divided into pain relievers and muscle relaxants. Pain relievers (other than simple medications such as Paracetamol) are used to treat acutely painful joints and patients with signs of inflammation. Muscle relaxants are used to treat stiff and painful muscles. Most of them also tend to relax patients generally and some cause drowsiness. However, because many patients are under stress of some kind, they can benefit from this kind of medication. Medication would not be used without a discussion of the benefits and side effects.

Counselling

As stated before, stress is a very important component in many patients. One of the most effective means of help is to understand that you may be under stress and to try to come to terms with it. Many patients feel better as a result of knowing this. It is not always this easy, so skilled counsellors can be employed to help. A few patients even benefit psychotherapy.

Surgery

Surgery is used only rarely. It is very rarely used purely for pain as it is not very effective. It can be effective where there is disability in jaw opening. The surgery is intricate and can have side effects. Nowadays it is quite easy to look inside the joint with a mini-telescope and this is usually done first. A few patients benefit from having nerves frozen or cut if pain is very severe and, occasionally, an injection into the joint space can be helpful.

Can it be cured?

The answer is a guarded 'Yes'. Most patients do get better but it usually takes some months or even longer. However, a good number do get better quickly and don't suffer again. Many find that it is a condition that comes and goes and that each episode requires some sort of treatment to help. Only a few people seem to be resistant to treatment and, even then, some form of treatment is usually helpful.







Finally, it is probably worth stating that nobody has ever died from this condition!

TEMPORMANDIBULAR JOINT PROBLEMS








As has been explained to you, there are certain things you can do to help your problem and certain things that can make it worse.

The following are things that can help or make the problem worse:-

To help

-  Use a well-padded hot water bottle or hot wet flannel on the outside of the face.
-  Take simple analgesics such as Panadol.
-  Wear a hat or scarf in cold weather.
-  Support the jaw when yawning.
-  Eat a soft diet (ie nothing needing a lot of chewing)
-  Chew equally on both sides of the mouth.

To Avoid

-  Chewing gum
-  Putting pens, pencils, fingers, etc in the mouth
-  Biting fingernails
-  Do not bite into large items of food, eg apples. These should be cut up into small pieces and put into the back of the mouth.
-  Avoid chewing with the front teeth.
-  Avoid clenching and grinding the teeth, eg when concentrating.
-  Do not rest your jaw on your hands.

We hope these hints will alleviate, if not remedy, your problem.

