

Have jaw pain?

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What's TMJ?

In conversation I have heard individuals report that they have TMJ, in reference to problems with their jaw. Actually everyone has TMJ, two of them, as a matter of fact. TMJ stands for **temporomandibular joint**, the small hinged joint that joins the upper and lower jaw, found along either side of our upper cheek. A problem with this joint is referred to as a TMJ disorder.

The TMJ is involved in talking, drinking, chewing and yawning, as controlled by the muscles that are around it. When the muscles are strained, you may feel pain or the way you move your jaw may be altered. Because the muscles are located along the cheek and temple area, one can experience pain along the jaw, cheek, ear and head. Other joints can be involved presenting as headaches or pain in the neck or



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shoulder. Symptoms may occur as a one-time episode, mild or severe in intensity, or a chronic problem occurring periodically or constantly. There may or may not be a loss of movement limiting the functions that your jaw takes part in such as eating, drinking and talking.

There are various sources for the potential pain or loss of movement of the TMJ. Some are dental problems; congenital abnormalities; trauma to the jaw; poor work station set-ups; neck problems including poor posture; behaviours that increase the tension of the surrounding muscles. In this article I will draw attention to excessive muscle tension and posture.

Behaviours such as clenching your jaw, teeth grinding, biting fingernails, chewing food on one side only of the jaw and regular gum chewing can cause overuse of some of the jaw muscles. As a result, the muscles may shorten or develop tender points which can refer pain into the cheek, ear or head. The mechanics of the joint may be altered causing pain or limited movement.

Opening your mouth to the extreme can cause strain on the disc located in the joint, causing pain and sometimes causing jaw movements to be blocked. Poor posture can change forces on the neck and jaw also.

Here are some easy things you can do to prevent problems with your TMJ. When pushing or pulling or gripping forcefully, take note as to whether or not you are clenching your jaw. If so, try to keep your jaw relaxed when working with your arms.

Cut up whole portions of fruit or large portions of food into smaller pieces to avoid opening your mouth to the extreme. Chew on both sides of your mouth and limit the frequency of gum chewing, with pieces of gum that are neither too big or small.

Check your head posture. Is your chin poking forward or shoulders rounded forward? Does your work station, home computer desk or car seat cause you to assume these

postures? If so, you can work on the sitting posture correction exercise that I have mentioned in previous articles (*Prom Queen* and *Nordic Walking*). Adjust your computer screen so that your eyes look between a range from the straight horizontal to 15 degrees down. Have your arms supported with your elbows bent at 90 degrees, forearms resting horizontally on arm rests and wrists straight for computer work. Correct the tilt of your car seat or headrest so your head doesn't poke forward.

Try activities that help you relax such as listening to music; exercising; deep breathing; day dreaming or massage therapy. Find your favourite.

If you have jaw, face or head pain see your physician who can direct your care to an appropriate health care provider such as a dentist, physiotherapist, otorhinolaryngologist or massage therapist.



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