



TMJ Disorders

Understanding Jaw Joint Problems and Their Symptoms

What Is the TMJ?

The **temporomandibular joints (TMJs)** are the two joints that connect your lower jaw (mandible) to your skull. You have one joint on each side of your face, just in front of your ears.

These joints allow you to:

- Open and close your mouth
- Chew
- Speak
- Yawn
- Move your jaw from side to side

The TMJs are among the most frequently used joints in the body.

What Are TMJ Disorders?

Temporomandibular disorders (TMD) are a group of conditions affecting the jaw joints, the muscles used for chewing, or both.

Many people experience temporary jaw discomfort at some point in their lives, and most cases improve with conservative treatment.

Common Symptoms

Symptoms vary from person to person and may include:

- Jaw pain
- Pain near the ears
- Clicking or popping sounds
- Difficulty opening the mouth fully
- Jaw stiffness

- Locking of the jaw
- Pain while chewing
- Facial muscle soreness
- Headaches
- Neck pain

Some people hear clicking without pain. Clicking alone does **not** necessarily indicate a serious problem.

What Causes TMJ Disorders?

There is often **no single cause**.

Several factors may contribute, including:

- Teeth grinding (bruxism)
- Jaw injury
- Arthritis
- Muscle tension
- Stress
- Connective tissue disorders
- Certain bite abnormalities (in some cases)

Many cases involve more than one contributing factor.

Is Jaw Clicking Normal?

A clicking or popping sound may occur when the small disc inside the joint moves slightly during jaw movement.

If clicking occurs:

- Without pain
- Without limited jaw movement

it often does **not** require treatment.

However, if clicking is accompanied by pain or difficulty opening the mouth, an evaluation is recommended.

How Are TMJ Disorders Diagnosed?

Your dentist or healthcare provider may perform:

- A medical history review
- Examination of jaw movement
- Evaluation of the chewing muscles
- Assessment of joint sounds
- Bite evaluation

When appropriate, additional imaging such as:

- Dental X-rays
- MRI
- CT scan

may be recommended.

Conservative Treatment

Many TMJ disorders improve without surgery.

Common recommendations include:

Resting the Jaw

Temporarily choosing softer foods may reduce strain on the joints.

Examples include:

- Yogurt
 - Eggs
 - Pasta
 - Cooked vegetables
 - Soup
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Avoid Extreme Jaw Movements

Try to avoid:

- Chewing ice
 - Chewing gum for long periods
 - Opening the mouth excessively wide
 - Nail biting
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Heat or Cold Therapy

Warm compresses or cold packs may provide temporary symptom relief for some people.

Stress Reduction

Because stress may contribute to jaw muscle tension, relaxation techniques may help some individuals.

Examples include:

- Deep breathing
 - Meditation
 - Regular physical activity
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Night Guards

If teeth grinding contributes to symptoms, your dentist may recommend a **custom-made night guard**.

A night guard helps protect the teeth and may reduce stress on the jaw muscles.

Medications

Depending on your symptoms, your healthcare provider may recommend short-term use of medications such as:

- Pain relievers
- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Muscle relaxants

Only take medications as directed by your healthcare provider.

Physical Therapy

Some patients benefit from physical therapy that focuses on:

- Gentle jaw exercises
- Improving jaw movement
- Reducing muscle tension
- Improving posture

Your healthcare provider can determine whether physical therapy is appropriate.

Is Surgery Usually Needed?

No.

Most TMJ disorders improve with conservative treatment.

Surgery is considered only in selected cases after careful evaluation and when less invasive treatments have not been successful.

When Should You Seek Evaluation?

Contact your dentist or healthcare provider if you experience:

- Persistent jaw pain
- Difficulty opening or closing your mouth
- Jaw locking
- Swelling near the jaw
- Pain that interferes with eating
- Symptoms lasting several weeks

Early evaluation can help identify the cause and guide appropriate treatment.

Common Myths

"Jaw clicking always means surgery is needed."

False.

Many people have painless clicking that requires no treatment.

"TMJ disorders only affect older adults."

False.

TMD can occur at any age.

"Nothing can be done for TMJ pain."

False.

Most people improve with conservative treatment, including self-care, physical therapy, and appropriate dental management.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ TMJ disorders affect the jaw joints and chewing muscles.
 - ✓ Common symptoms include jaw pain, clicking, headaches, and difficulty opening the mouth.
 - ✓ Teeth grinding and muscle tension are common contributing factors.
 - ✓ Most cases improve without surgery.
 - ✓ Custom night guards may help protect teeth when grinding is present.
 - ✓ Persistent jaw pain or limited movement should be evaluated by a dental professional.
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References

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