

TMJ PATIENT

TMJ is a term used to describe the temporal mandibular joint (jaw joint). It is a unique joint because it is a bilateral hinge joint, meaning that the right side does control some function and dysfunction of the left side. Other joints, for example a right knee, usually do not directly control the movements of the left knee. The TMJ is similar to many other joints as it has synovial fluid to lubricate the joint, ligamentous structures to provide stability and muscles to control movement. It also has a fibrocartilaginous disc similar to the meniscus in your knee.

When your TMJ is out of harmony, it can be due to muscle, bite or joint problems. The combination of stress, poor posture or teeth clenching/grinding can cause the muscles around the joint to tighten up. Muscle tightness draws your teeth and jaws together increasing the pressure on the joint.

A bad bite can also disrupt the proper positioning of the joint and possibly cause the disc to move out of position.

Joint problems resulting from an injury (blow to the jaw) or arthritis can cause ligamentous stretching, possibly allowing the disc to slip out of place, and lead to degeneration.

A variety of symptoms can be related to TMJ dysfunction including headaches, jaw pain, neck pain, grinding or clenching of the teeth at night, clicking or popping in the jaw joint and pain with eating.

The following is a partial list of ideas and activities to avoid to help keep from flaring up the temporal mandibular joint complex.

1. Eating - Avoid taking large bites out of apples and other foods. Instead, cut them into smaller bite size pieces.
2. Bruxism - If you are grinding your teeth at night, please let your therapist know. People often grind their teeth without realizing it, which increases the compression force in the joint leading to joint degeneration.
3. Posture - The posture of your spine will be important because some of the muscles that control the jaw attach to the shoulder blade and neck region. It is very important to be sitting and sleeping in good posture. A cervical pillow used at night may help to keep the cervical spine in a good position while you sleep.

In summary, to control your TMJ symptoms, it will be essential that you:

- Minimize the stress on the joint by avoiding foods that are difficult to chew and eliminate gum chewing altogether.
- Perform exercises as directed by your physical therapist.
- Maintain good standing, sitting and sleeping postures.

Let your dentist know about your TMJ symptoms. TMJ is difficult to treat and the best approach is a "team approach" between your dentist, physician and physical therapist.