



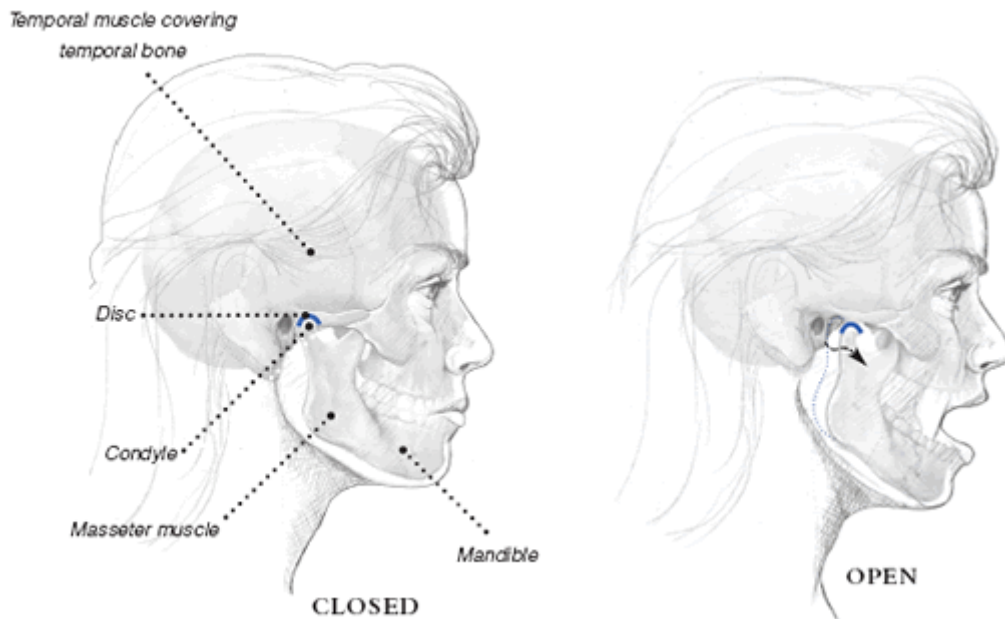
EAR, NOSE, & THROAT CENTER OF THE OZARKS

# Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) Disorders

Temporomandibular joint and muscle disorders, commonly called "TMJ," are a group of conditions that cause pain and dysfunction in the jaw joint and the muscles that control jaw movement. We don't know for certain how many people have TMJ disorders, but some estimates suggest that over 10 million Americans are affected. **Many people with TMJ disorders experience symptoms that are perceived to originate from the ear—particularly discomfort.** For most people, pain in the area of the jaw joint or muscles does not signal a serious problem. Generally, discomfort from these conditions is occasional and temporary, often occurring in cycles. The pain eventually goes away with little or no treatment.

## What is the temporomandibular joint?

The TMJ connects the lower jaw, called the mandible, to the bone at the side of the head. If you place your fingers just in front of your ears and open your mouth, you can feel the joints. Movement of the TMJ enables us to talk, chew and yawn. Muscles attached to and surrounding the TMJ control its position and movement. **The TMJ is physically attached to the ear.**



## **What are TMJ disorders?**

Disorders of the jaw joint and chewing muscles—and how people respond to them—vary widely. Researchers generally agree that the conditions fall into three main categories:

1. Myofascial pain, the most common TMJ disorder, involves discomfort or pain in the muscles that control jaw function.
2. Arthritis refers to a group of degenerative/inflammatory joint disorders that can affect the TMJ.
3. Internal derangement of the joint involves a displaced disc or dislocated jaw (uncommon).

A person may have one or more of these conditions at the same time. Some people have other health problems that co-exist with TMJ disorders, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, sleep disturbances or fibromyalgia (a painful condition that affects muscles and other soft tissues throughout the body).

## **What causes TMJ disorders?**

Trauma to the jaw or TMJ plays a role in some TMJ disorders, but for most jaw joint and muscle problems, scientists don't know the cause. For many people, symptoms seem to start without obvious reason. The relationship to TMJ to bad bite or orthodontic braces is not clear.

There is no scientific proof that clicking sounds in the jaw joint lead to serious problems. In fact, jaw clicking is common in the general population. Jaw noises alone, without pain or limited jaw movement, do not indicate a TMJ disorder and do not warrant treatment.

Stress and tooth grinding may be causes of TMJ disorders. Yet, many people with these disorders do not grind their teeth, and many long-time tooth grinders do not have painful joint symptoms. Researchers also found that stress seen in many persons with jaw joint and muscle disorders is more likely the result of dealing with chronic jaw pain or dysfunction than the cause of the condition.

## **What are the signs and symptoms?**

A variety of symptoms may be linked to TMJ disorders. Pain, particularly in the chewing muscles, jaw joint or ear is the most common symptom. Persons with TMJ disorders may or may not experience the following additional symptoms:

- ear pain
- radiating pain in the face, jaw, or neck
- headache
- jaw muscle stiffness
- limited movement or locking of the jaw
- painful clicking, popping or grating in the jaw joint when opening or closing the mouth

## **How are TMJ disorders treated?**

Conservative, reversible treatments are strongly recommended. Conservative treatments do not invade the tissues of the face, jaw, or joint, or involve surgery. Even when TMJ disorders have become persistent, most patients still do not need aggressive types of treatment.

## **Conservative Treatments**

Because the most common jaw joint and muscle problems are temporary and do not get worse, simple treatment is all that is usually needed to relieve discomfort.

### *Self-Care Practices*

- eat soft foods
- apply warm compresses (hot towels/heating blanket)
- avoid extreme jaw movements (such as wide yawning, loud singing, and gum chewing)
- learn techniques for relaxing and reducing stress
- practice gentle jaw stretching and relaxing exercises that may help increase jaw movement.

### *Pain Medications*

For many people with TMJ disorders, short-term use of over-the-counter pain medicines or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS), such as ibuprofen or Alleve (naproxen), may provide temporary relief from jaw discomfort.

### *Physical Therapy*

Your doctor may recommend evaluation with a physical therapist that treats TMJ disorders with treatment aimed at the muscles related to chewing.

### *Stabilization Splints*

Your doctor or dentist may recommend an oral appliance, also called a stabilization splint or bite guard, which is a plastic guard that fits over the upper or lower teeth. Stabilization splints are the most widely used treatments for TMJ disorders.

## **Botox Injections**

In severe cases of TMJ pain that do not respond to conservative treatments, injections of Botox into the chewing muscles (masseter and temporalis) may be beneficial to relax these muscles and place less stress on the TMJ joint. This treatment may need to be repeated every 3-6 months.

## **Surgery**

Other types of treatments, such as surgical procedures, may or may not be considered by your dentist or oral surgeon if conservative measures fail. Surgical treatments are controversial, often irreversible, and should generally be avoided if possible.

## **Conclusion**

Remember that for most people, discomfort from TMJ disorders will eventually go away on its own. Simple self-care practices are often effective in easing symptoms.