

WHAT IS TMJ?

Temporomandibular disorders (TMJ / TMDs) are often called "TMJ" by doctors, patients and even insurance companies, although the term TMJ actually refers only to the jaw joints themselves. TMD/TMJ describes a group of diseases that can involve the jaw joints, the muscles that control jaw movement and the dental occlusion. TMJ / TMDs are physical disorders arising from an imbalance in the delicate working relationship of the jaw and skull with the muscles that move the jaw, as well as the nervous system associated with these systems. This imbalance results in muscle fatigue, spasm and/or joint dysfunction, and even changes in the teeth, which in turn cause a variety of symptoms, unique for each person.

TMJs are located on both sides of the face in front of the ears, connecting the jawbone (mandible) to the skull (temporal bone). They're the most complicated joints in the human body, providing rotation (pivoting) movement like all joints, as well as sliding movement, called translation. That's what allows us to open our mouths wide and move our jaws from left to right. Between the top end of the jaw and the socket in the skull is a disc of cartilage, which — like the discs in the neck and back — serve as shock absorbers, protecting the bones from hitting each other.

The proper, healthy function of the TMJ system requires normal structure and function of all the component parts, including muscles, nervous system, ligaments, joints (bones, discs and connecting tissues) and the dental occlusion.

TMJ/TMD Symptoms include:

- Headaches
- Facial Pain
- Jaw Pain
- Ear Pain
- Clicking/Popping in Jaw Joints
- Difficulty Chewing
- Limited Mouth Opening
- Uncomfortable bite
- Changing bite
- Tinnitus
- Muffled Ears
- Worn-down Teeth
- Clenching
- Neck Pain
- Dizziness

THE CAUSES OF TMJ / TMD

The symptoms of TMJ / TMD, which affect millions of adults and children, can gradually appear with no apparent, specific cause. They also can occur after a trauma, such as a traffic accident or a blow to the face. Even subtle repeated traumas, like clenching the teeth or excessive gum chewing, nail biting or cradling a phone between your shoulder and the side of your head can cause TMJ / TMD . These conditions can also be caused by a bad bite (dental malocclusion), which is not synchronized with healthy muscle and joint function. Systemic diseases and developmental abnormalities also can cause TMJ / TMD.

Stress and tension may also awaken a quiet, asymptomatic TMJ / TMD or aggravate an existing temporomandibular condition. However, stress alone does not cause TMJ / TMD if a patient has healthy dental occlusion and muscle and jaw function.

A THOROUGH EXAM IS CRITICAL

All too often patients are classified as "chronic pain patients" and their complaints pigeonholed as stress or psychological disorders. These patients may be relegated to treatment focusing only on medication and counseling,



with no treatment of the physical cause of their illness. A thorough analysis of each patient is essential to determine the source of pain. Early and appropriate treatment of a TMJ / TMD may avoid the progression to a chronic pain state.

DO YOU HAVE TMJ / TMD ?

If you think you may have a temporomandibular disorder, ask yourself these questions.

- Do you experience pain in your face, ears, below or in front of your ears or headaches for which your medical doctor has not found a cause?
- Do your ears muffle or feel clogged?
- Do your jaw joints (TMJ), located in front of your ears, hurt when you chew and do they make clicking or crackling noises?
- Do your facial muscles feel tired or stiff when you awaken, during the day, after a lot of speaking or when yawning?
- Do you clench your teeth together while sleeping or awake? A spouse can often tell you about your jaw muscle activity during sleeping.
- Do you have headaches in the sides of your temples?
- Are you able to open your mouth freely, smoothly and as wide as you are accustomed to doing?
- Can you move your jaw from side to side with your mouth open?
- Do you experience episodes when your jaw feels that it locks open or shut?
- Do you feel that your upper and lower teeth don't fit together as they usually do?
- Is your bite comfortable? Is chewing tough foods uncomfortable or painful?
- Do you experience dental pain in lots of teeth for which your dentist has found no cause?
- Are your teeth chipping and are the front teeth worn flat on their edges?
- Do your upper front teeth completely cover the lower teeth when you bite together?
- Have your teeth been shifting, creating spaces or crowding for no apparent dental reason?

Before prescribing the proper treatment for your particular problem, a variety of diagnostic procedures may be necessary. Once a diagnosis is determined, the appropriate therapy will be determined. This may include:

- Splint/Jaw appliance
- Occlusal equilibration
- Occlusal rehabilitation
- Orthodontics

The importance of early detection and correct diagnosis cannot be overstated. TMJ problems can advance in stages and grow progressively worse. A minor problem now could become a major source of pain in the future. Dr. Fleming is extremely competent in accurately diagnosing Temporomandibular Joint Disease (TMD).

Please contact our office for more information or to setup a consultation.