

Temporomandibular disorder (TMD): patient advice sheet

Temporomandibular disorder is a condition affecting the movement of the jaw. It is usually a benign muscular condition so it is not harmful. It is very common and you may have it on one or both sides. Many people may have some symptoms of TMD and in a small number it causes pain.

What causes TMD?

TMD is caused by many things acting together. Most of the discomfort comes from overusing your muscles and joints which causes inflammation similar to a sprained joint and muscle spasm. There are many ways this can happen:

- Clenching your teeth together. You may do this when you are worried, stressed or depressed by some aspect of your life, such as relationship, financial, exam or illness worries.
- Grinding your teeth together. You can do this during the day or at night.
- Habits such as chewing pencils, biting your nails, holding things in your mouth and holding the telephone between your neck and shoulder.
- Overworking your jaw muscles by constant chewing, such as habitually chewing gum.

Will it get worse?

TMD is a totally benign condition meaning that it is not harmful and does not cause any long-term damage. The symptoms tend to come and go, often feeling worse when you are anxious. Studies show that it does not get worse as you get older but is actually one of the few conditions which often seems to get better.

What problems may I have?

- Jaw pain or soreness that may be worse when you wake up or at night.
- Jaw pain when biting, chewing or yawning.
- Clicking from your jaw joint when you move it.
- Stiffness or locking of your jaw joint.
- Earache.
- Difficulty opening and/or closing your mouth.
- Headaches.
- Difficulty swallowing.

What can I do?

Treatment is based around reducing joint inflammation and muscle spasm. This requires self-care; the more you help yourself, the more effective your treatment.

- If you notice yourself clenching your teeth during the day the stop, swallow and let your teeth rest apart in this position for 5 seconds. This allows your jaw and muscles to rest and relax. Your teeth should only touch when you are chewing, swallowing and sometimes speaking.
- Avoid opening your mouth really wide eg cut up apples, avoid BigMacs etc
- Eat foods that you do not need to chew hard or for a long time, ie a softer diet.
- Avoid habits such as chewing your fingernails and gum.
- Massaging the muscle where tight for 1 min, 4 times a day and applying warmth can help.
- Anti-inflammatory painkillers such as ibuprofen or can help. Topically applied gels containing NSAIDs work very well if applied over the joint (in front of the ear) 4 times a day for 4 weeks. If these are not enough, muscle relaxants or a small dose of a medicine called a tricyclic antidepressant can give added pain relief.
- Avoid straining your neck and back with prolonged poor posture, for example, when you are working at a computer or a desk.
- Splints or bite guards are sometimes suggested. These cover the teeth at night to reduce clenching of the jaw, and can be made by dentists. There is no definite evidence from research trials that they work, but some people find them helpful.
- Try to reduce the sources of stress in your life if possible and do more general physical exercise if you can. Please be patient – 9 out of 10 patients with TMD get better by following these simple suggestions.
- Physiotherapy treatments, such as ultrasound and gentle jaw exercises, can be helpful.
- Treatment of other conditions: If there is an underlying condition - for example, a type of arthritis which is contributing to the TMJ disorder - this may need treating in its own right. It is very rare to need specialist dental care (orthodontics) or jaw joint surgery to correct TMD.

Exercises to improve jaw function: Set aside two 5 minute periods each day at a time that you are relaxed eg just before you go to bed and when you get up in the morning. Sit upright to perform all the following exercises:

Close your mouth and make sure that your teeth are touching lightly, not clenched together. Rest the tip of your tongue on your palate just behind your upper front teeth.

Run the tip of your tongue backwards on your palate towards your soft palate at the back as far as it will go. Keep your teeth touching gently.

Hold your tongue in this position to keep contact with your soft palate and slowly open your mouth until you feel your tongue being pulled away. Do not open your mouth any further but stay in this position for 5 seconds and then relax and close your mouth.

Repeat this procedure slowly but firmly for 5 mins. As you perform this exercise you should feel the tension in the back of your neck and under your chin. The first few times you perform this exercise do it looking in a mirror to check your lower teeth move vertically downwards and not off to one side. If you are performing this exercise correctly there should be no clicks or noises from the joints. If there is, restart the exercise and continue practicing adjusting your position until it is click free.