



Temporomandibular (jaw) Joint Problems

The joint between your upper and lower jaws, just in front of your ears, is called the temporomandibular joint ('TMJ' for short). Cartilage (a gristly substance) separates the bone surfaces. When it works well, it enables you to talk, chew and yawn. **Temporomandibular disorder (TMD)** is a problem affecting the 'chewing' muscles and the joints between the lower jaw and the base of the skull. Doctors sometimes refer to the condition as 'myofascial pain disorder'.

What are the symptoms?

- Clicking, popping or grating noises when you move your jaw.
- Difficulty opening or closing your mouth, including locking of the jaw.
- A change in the way the upper and lower teeth fit together.
- Swelling or tenderness over the joint.
- Pain in the face, neck and chewing muscles. Some people even get pain in their shoulders and/or back.
- Headaches or migraine, especially first thing in the morning.
- Pain in your ear, possibly with ringing noises.

The condition itself isn't usually serious, and the symptoms it can cause only lasts a few months before getting better. However, these symptoms may lead to related symptoms, such as disturbed sleep.

Clicking or grating noises are usually caused by the cartilage jumping when you open your mouth. Jaw joint pain is usually the result of increased tension in the jaw muscles, and can be caused by grinding or clenching your teeth (in your sleep or during the day) and habits such as biting your nails or chewing pens. These are often related to fatigue, stress and anxiety.

It has been estimated that up to 30% of adults will experience TMJ at some point in their lives.

Things you can do to help

- Apply a warm, wet towel gently to both sides of the face. The heat will increase the blood flow to the jaw muscles.
- Cut up food into small pieces.



- Avoid very hard and chewy foods.
- Try not to open your mouth too wide, for example when you yawn.
- Do not bite your nails.
- Practice jaw exercises.
- Use relaxation and stress relieving techniques.
- Take painkillers – paracetamol, ibuprofen or codeine can help resolve the pain. If these aren't enough to control the pain, your doctor may prescribe stronger medication such as a muscle relaxant or antidepressant.
- Wear a 'mouth guard' or splint at night.
- Give up habits that aggravate the condition.
- Undergo corrective dental treatments, however these are only recommended for extreme cases.

Some people experience jaw joint problems because of the way their teeth or dentures meet when they bite. This can sometimes be resolved by either adjusting the position or shape of their teeth; replacing missing teeth with dentures or implants or by making a new denture.

Mouth guards (plastic devices that fit over your teeth) may be helpful if you grind your teeth. These cover the teeth at night to reduce jaw clenching and teeth grinding, and can be made to measure by your dentist.

Exercises that can relieve the symptoms of TMJ problems

The purpose of the exercises is to prevent clicking and to strengthen the muscles which pull your jaw backwards. It will relax the muscle which pulls the jaw forwards or to the side as you open your mouth, so it can get back to normal naturally.

It doesn't take long to do and if you are persistent and go slowly you will see results in most common cases. They mainly consist of slow gentle movements that are repetitive. Sit upright in a chair and do the following:-

Exercise 1

- Working in front of a mirror, place your fingers over your jaw joints.
- Curl your tongue backwards to the roof of your mouth.
- Keeping your tongue in this position, open your mouth slowly and smoothly.
- Repeat 5 times, twice a day.



Exercise 2

- Start with your jaw in its comfortable rest position with your teeth slightly apart.
- Place your thumb underneath the centre of your chin.
- Open your mouth slowly by lowering your jaw, while applying steady light pressure to the bottom of your chin with your thumb.
- Hold your mouth in the open position for the count of 5 seconds, then close your mouth slowly.
- Repeat this exercise 3 to 6 times.

Exercise 3

- Open your mouth and place an object that is less than ½ -inch thick, such as a pencil, between your teeth.
- Move your jaw to one side, then the other.
- Repeat this exercise several times, then choose a thicker object to place between your teeth when the exercise is no longer challenging.

Be consistent with these TMJ exercises. You'll see better results if you perform them daily.