

Jaw Pain

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. The condition appears to be more common in women than men.

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. Some people, however, develop significant, long-term symptoms.

If you have questions about TMJ disorders, you are not alone. Researchers, too, are looking for answers to what causes these conditions and what are the best treatments. Until we have scientific evidence for safe and effective treatments, it's important to avoid, when possible, procedures that can cause permanent changes in your bite or jaw. Chewing gum and eating harder foods like beef jerky should be avoided.

What are the signs and symptoms?

A variety of symptoms may be linked to TMJ disorders. Pain, particularly in the chewing muscles and/or jaw joint, is the most common symptom. Other likely symptoms include:

- radiating pain in the face, jaw, or neck
- 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
- a change in the way the upper and lower teeth fit together

How are TMJ disorders diagnosed?

There is no widely accepted, standard test now available to correctly diagnose TMJ disorders. Because the exact causes and symptoms are not clear, identifying these disorders can be difficult and confusing. Currently, health care providers note the patient's description of symptoms, take a detailed medical and dental history, and examine problem areas, including the head, neck, face and jaw. Imaging studies may also be recommended.

You may want to consult your doctor to rule out known causes of pain. Facial pain can be a symptom of many other conditions, such as sinus or ear infections, various types of headaches and facial neuralgias (nerve-related facial pain). Ruling out these problems first helps in identifying TMJ disorders.