

TMJ Disorder



The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research estimates that more than 10 million people in the U.S. are in pain because of complex problems in their jaw joints. Other sources put the estimate even higher, at 40 million. Sometimes people only suffer briefly, and then the joint heals. In other cases, that jaw pain becomes chronic. Doctors identify the problem as TMJ disorder. TMJ stands for “temporomandibular joint.” It is also sometimes called myofascial pain dysfunction.

You have two of these complex joints. Each TMJ is located right in front of the ear, where the upper and lower jaws are connected. The joint consists of a ball, a cartilage lining in the form of a disk, and a socket. You use it constantly every day whenever you move your jaw.

Dental problems may or may not cause pain in the jaw joint, but they can also make it much worse. As a result, TMJ is usually treated by a dentist, and some dentists have actually decided to specialize in this one specific problem.

The Underlying Causes

As for so many things in life, doctors and dentists alike don't always know what all the underlying causes of TMJ disorder really are. Women are more likely to have a problem than men, leading some medical researchers to wonder whether TMJ disorder has a connection with female hormones. And sometimes the underlying cause is obvious. Developing a TMJ disorder is more understandable when you know you've previously had a fractured jaw, because jaw trauma is one cause.

Of course, saying that we don't know the underlying cause isn't a satisfying answer. Researchers have speculated about some possible causes, but some of the new research does not support traditional explanations. For example, many people have thought that teeth grinding and clenching (called bruxism) might cause TMJ disorder because it wears down the cartilage lining of the jaw joint. But there are many people who suffer from TMJ disorder who do not grind their teeth at all.

Another possible explanation is the idea that TMJ disorder can occur as a result of other dental problems, such as teeth that are misaligned. This seems sensible; we know that misaligned teeth can certainly cause other problems, so why not TMJ disorder? But researchers are finding that there doesn't seem to be a connection after all. More than that, they've found that if someone is tense or stressed, sometimes the tension and the stress are a result of TMJ disorder instead of a cause.

Other possible causes are constant gum chewing or fingernail biting, or holding the head in an unnatural position for too long. For example, if someone has to use a phone frequently as part of a job, holding the phone between the head and shoulder is an awkward position that qualifies as a possible cause when it happens too often or too long.

One source of TMJ disorder that does seem clear is when the disk between the ball and the socket gets knocked out of position. It may be possible to do exercises that help the disk shift back into position; if that fails, surgery may be necessary.

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Unfortunately, the uncertainty about underlying causes can make it harder to diagnose the problem correctly. Since facial pain can also be caused by other problems, it is important to rule them out first before making a final diagnosis. Sinus and ear infections can cause pain. So can some kinds of headaches, and facial pain caused by the nerves. This last is called facial neuralgia.

Someone who seems to be suffering from TMJ disorder needs to have a complete medical and dental work-up to determine whether the problem is really with the TMJ at all. If it is, dentists think that ultimately the cause has to do with overusing the jaw, a joint that is out of balance, or suffering from spasms.

Treatment for a chronic TMJ condition always involves trying to figure out what the causes are so they can be corrected.

What to Look For

If you think you might have TMJ disorder, you won't be able to make the final diagnosis on your own, but there are certainly some symptoms that might make it easier to decide whether you need to seek dental or medical help. Common symptoms include:

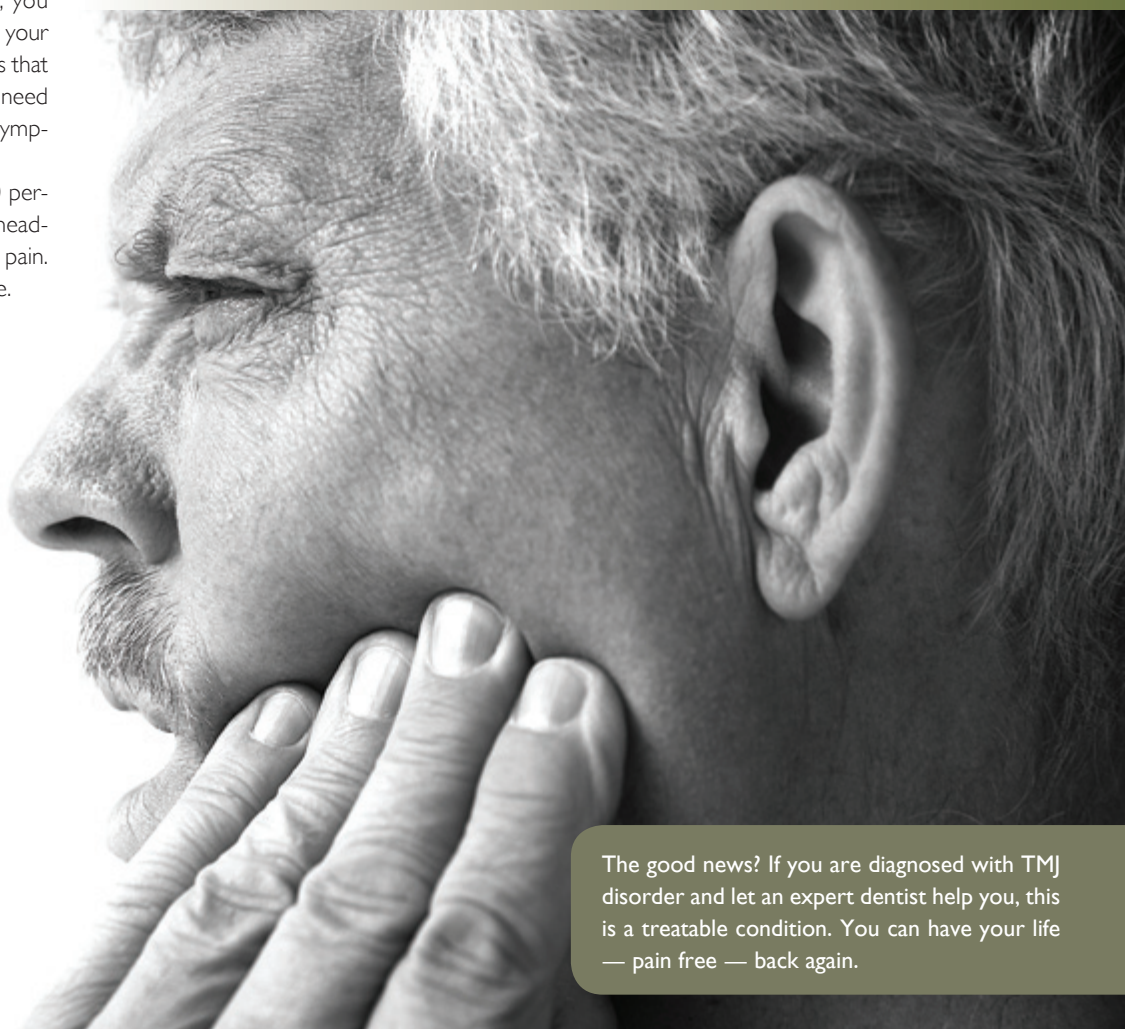
- ▶ **Too many headaches.** Some 80 percent of all TMJ disorder patients have headaches, and 40 percent experience facial pain. Being too cold can make the pain worse.

- ▶ **Earaches.** About half of all patients with TMJ disorder suffer from pain in their ears, even though they don't have any signs of an ear infection. To rule out ear infection, it may be necessary to consult an ear, nose, and throat specialist.
- ▶ **Jaw sounds.** If you hear crunching, grinding, or popping sounds from your jaw, this is called crepitus and may indicate a TMJ disorder even though the jaw sounds may not be accompanied by pain.
- ▶ **Dizziness.** If you feel slightly dizzy or out of balance, then you are part of the 40 percent of patients with TMJ disorder to have that experience. This is less likely, however, if you actually experience the spinning sensation common to other kinds of vertigo.
- ▶ **Muffled sounds.** Some 33 percent of all patients with TMJ disorder find that their hearing is impacted. Sounds may be muffled. The ears may feel clogged or even full.

- ▶ **Pain during abrupt changes in atmospheric pressure.** If you find that the sudden atmospheric pressure changes that occur during a plane ride are painful, it might indicate TMJ disorder.
- ▶ **Tinnitus.** Some 33 percent of those who suffer with TMJ disorder also suffer from tinnitus. Of those who do, half of them find that the tinnitus goes away after their TMJ disorder has been treated successfully.

TMJ is a treatable condition, even though the treatment may require complex analysis in order to decide on the best course of action. Treatment generally takes three to six months, and depends on how severe your case actually is.

The good news? If you are diagnosed with TMJ disorder and let an expert dentist help you, this is a treatable condition. You can have your life — pain free — back again.



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