

Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is the temporomandibular joint (TMJ)?

TMJ is the jaw joint located in front of the ear where the jaw bone connects to the head. Feel the joint by placing your finger on your cheek in front of your ear while opening and closing your mouth.

What causes TMJ disorders?

- Arthritis
- Stress
- jaw clenching and/or teeth grinding
- other things that strain the jaw joint and the muscles around it

Some people with TMJ disorders also have anxiety, depression, or an increased awareness of pain. These problems may require a visit to your medical provider.

What are symptoms of TMJ disorders?

Dull pain on one side of the face near the ear is the primary symptom. Additional areas of pain can be: ear, jaw and back of neck. Headaches can be caused by TMJ disorders. Pain may be intermittent or constant. Moving the jaw increases pain. Patients may experience a clicking sound and a “crunchy feeling” with movement of the jaw joint.

When should I see my medical provider?

If you are worried about your symptoms or if they are disrupting your academic work, home or social life, see your medical provider.

- Frequency- Your symptoms are increasing in frequency, or you are using medication to treat the pain more than twice/week.
- Degree of Pain- Pain is severe and prevents you from doing activities you want to do.
- Other associated symptoms- If fever, vomiting, stiff neck, toothache, jaw or sinus pain accompany a headache, you should be evaluated by your provider.

How is TMJ disorder pain treated?

A combination of treatments work for most people. Stress reduction, self care and awareness of triggers are important. Applying heat to the affected area can be soothing. Avoid chewing gum or tougher food on the affected side. Addition of the following can be helpful.

Medication

- Over-the-counter pain medication (ibuprofen, naproxen or acetaminophen)
- Muscle Relaxants
- Certain medication used for depression

Exercises:

- Simple jaw exercises you can do on your own
- Physical therapy (referral can be made by your healthcare provider)

Devices

- Bite plates or occlusal splints fit in your mouth to prevent teeth grinding at night
- Hard or soft plastic
- May need to be specially made for you

Let your provider know if you are using over the counter medicines to treat your pain more than twice per week, or if you are not getting relief from these medicines. You may need to see a Dentist or oral surgeon who specializes in TMJ disorders.