



Creekside Physical Therapy

TMJ Dysfunction FAQ

What is TMJ?

TMJ is the acronym for the Temporomandibular Joint. Everyone has two of them, one on each side of their jaw. Individuals who have pain in their joint or have difficulty using their jaw may have a TMJ disorder or dysfunction, called TMD.

What does it mean when the jaw clicks or pops?

Sometimes it may mean only that your jaw is overworked, the muscles are fatigued, and coordination is poor. However, if it happens on a regular basis it may suggest problems within the joint. The articular disc is a type of cartilage designed to act as a shock absorber and prevent friction between the jawbone (condyle) and the skull (temporal bone). A normal healthy joint does not make noise. If clicks or pops are present, it may mean the disc is slipping in and out of proper position.

What happens when the jaw locks?

If your jaw sticks when you open it so that you can't move it, it may mean the articular disc has slipped out of the place blocking your jaw from moving. Sometimes muscle tension may restrict your jaw opening. True "lockjaw" is a condition resulting from a bacterial infection and is called tetanus. The restriction is not mechanical.

Why is clenching bad for you?

Normally your teeth come together during chewing, biting, and swallowing. Total contact time in a 24-hour period may be only 20 minutes. If you clench or grind your teeth, this contact time may increase to several hours in a 24-hour period. That increases the workload on the jaw joint, muscles, and teeth significantly, which may lead to fatigue, uneven wear and tear, and eventually breakdown of involved structures.

When should I avoid eating hard to chew foods (such as bagels, steak, licorice, raw veggies, or others)?

Hard to chew foods may be part of a normal diet. Eating these foods demands strong muscle coordination, stable joint structures, and endurance. If these foods are eaten excessively, fatigue, poor coordination, and eventually jaw breakdown may occur. If your jaw already is showing

signs of dysfunction, hard to chew foods should be reduced or eliminated until your condition is more stable.

Why is posture so important?

How you sit and stand affects many things. The posture you assume will affect how high you can reach, how far you can turn your head, how deep you can breathe, how well you can swallow, how your teeth fit together, and how much work your neck and back muscles have to do. Your mother was right – sitting up straight was a good idea!

Why is sleeping on my stomach a problem?

When you lie on your stomach, your head is usually turned one way placing a constant pressure on one side of your face, constant pull on your neck muscles, and constant load on your neck joints. To avoid such strain, try to sleep on your back with your head and neck well supported by a pillow that can be shaped to your neck and head. Sleeping on your side is an alternative as long as your head and neck are supported to maintain a neutral position with your spine, usually by using two pillows overlapping.

What other habits should I avoid?

Many daily habits can increase the strain and workload on the jaw and related structures. These include biting fingernails or cuticles, biting or chewing pens and pencils, biting or chewing your lips, opening your mouth repeatedly or for extended periods, chomping on ice cubes, resting your chin on your hands and making your jaw pop.

What can I do?

If you are unsure whether you have TMJ Dysfunction or want to know more about it, ask your family physician, dentist, or TMJ specialist. Also, there are many publications available with helpful information. In many cases, self-treatment may be all that is required. Common sense and healthy choices go hand in hand.