

Clicking Jaw/Temporomandibular Disorders

Information Sheet

Around one in ten people in the UK have a problem with their jaw joint. Doctors call this group of conditions jaw joint dysfunction or temporomandibular disorder (TMD). They can cause pain and affect how well your jaw joint works.

Overall, around 1 in 10 people develop jaw joint problems at some point in their lives, but it may be as many as 1 in 6 women. Up to 7 out of 10 people have one of the symptoms at some point.

The jaw joint allows your jawbone to move from side to side, backwards and forwards, and to open and close your mouth. It's one of the most complicated joints in your body and has several muscles and ligaments, allowing different movements. Because it's so complicated, there are several different problems you may have with your jaw joint.

Symptoms Of Jaw Joint Problems

Your symptoms may include:

- Pain around your jaw, cheek, ear, neck, shoulders, or back
- Restricted movement, making it difficult to chew - you might feel as if you have a locked jaw, or you may not be able to close your mouth
- Popping, grating, or clicking sounds when you move your jaw
- Headaches
- Your bite (when you put your teeth together) is not feeling right

Not everyone has pain when they have jaw joint problems. Some people just have clicking and difficulty opening their mouths. If you do have pain, you may find that it gets worse as the day goes on. Symptoms may also get worse when you chew or if you're feeling stressed. You may be able to manage these symptoms at home, and they often get better on their own within a few months. But if you're worried about the pain, see your dentist to find out whether treatment could help.

Self-Help

Jaw joint problems will often get better within three to six months and don't usually cause any complications. Resting your jaw joint may help to relieve your symptoms. Here are some tips.

- Eat soft foods so you don't have to chew food for too long
- Don't yawn widely, chew gum, chew pens or pencils, or bite your nails
- Try to stop any habits such as clenching your jaw or grinding your teeth
- Try to reduce stress if you can, as this can make jaw clenching or teeth grinding worse - you might find relaxation techniques helpful
- Massage the muscles around your jaw
- Put a heat pad or a hot water bottle (filled with warm, not boiling, water) wrapped in a cloth or towel on your jaw

Exercises To Prevent Pain & Clicking Of The Jaw Joint

The purpose of the exercise is to prevent clicking of the jaw and to strengthen muscles that pull your jaw backwards. It will also overcome your tendency to move your jaw forward or to one side as you open your mouth and, in time, will relieve any discomfort you may have. Set aside two five-minute periods every day at a time when you are relaxed and have nothing on your mind. One good time is just before you go to bed, another perhaps when you get home from work.

Sit upright in a chair and carry out the following manoeuvres:

- Close your mouth on your back teeth, resting the tip of your tongue on your palate just behind the upper front teeth.
- Run the tip of your tongue backwards on the soft palate as far back as it will go, keeping the teeth in contact.
- Whilst forcing the tongue back to maintain contact with the soft palate, slowly open your mouth until you feel your tongue being pulled away from the soft palate. Do not try to open your mouth further. Keep it in this open position for five seconds and then close your mouth for five seconds.
- Repeat this manoeuvre slowly over the next five minutes in a firm but relaxed fashion.

As you open your mouth, you should feel tension in the muscles at the back of your jaw and beneath your chin. For the first few times that you do the exercises, you should check in front of a mirror that the lower teeth move vertically downwards and that there is no slight movement from side to side as you open your mouth.

If the exercises are being carried out correctly, there will be no clicks or noise from the joints. If there is, you must be making some error in carrying out your exercise. For the first week, carry out this exercise only for the two periods suggested during the day. Thereafter, do the exercises as often as you think about it.

If this exercise is carried out correctly and regularly, over a two to three week period, you will retrain your muscles so that your jaw opens and closes smoothly without clicks or jerks, and any pain that you are experiencing will subside.