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Information from Your Family Doctor

Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) Pain

Am Fam Physician. 2007 Nov 15;76(10):1483-1484.

What is the TMJ?

The temporomandibular (tem-PUH-ro-man-DIB-yoo-ler) joint, or the TMJ, connects the upper and lower jawbones. This joint allows the jaw to open wide and move back and forth when you chew, talk, or yawn.

What causes TMJ pain?

There are many causes of TMJ pain. Repeated chewing (for example, chewing gum) and clenching your teeth can cause pain in the joint. Some TMJ pain has no obvious cause.

What can I do to ease the pain?

There are many things you can do to help your pain get better. When you have pain:

- Eat soft foods and stay away from chewy foods (for example, taffy)
- Try to use both sides of your mouth to chew
- Don't chew gum
- Don't open your mouth wide (for example, during yawning or singing)
- Don't bite your cheeks or fingernails
- Lower your amount of stress and worry
- Applying a warm, damp washcloth to the joint may help.
- Over-the-counter pain medicines such as ibuprofen (one brand: Advil) or acetaminophen (one brand: Tylenol) might also help. Do not use these medicines if you are allergic to them or if your doctor told you

not to use them.

How can I stop the pain from coming back?

When your pain is better, you can do these exercises to make your muscles stronger and to keep the pain from coming back:

- Resisted mouth opening: Place your thumb or two fingers under your chin and open your mouth slowly, pushing up lightly on your chin with your thumb. Hold for three to six seconds. Close your mouth slowly.
- Resisted mouth closing: Place your thumbs under your chin and your two index fingers on the ridge between your mouth and the bottom of your chin. Push down lightly on your chin as you close your mouth.
- Tongue up: Slowly open and close your mouth while keeping the tongue touching the roof of the mouth.
- Side-to-side jaw movement: Place an object about one fourth of an inch thick (for example, two tongue depressors) between your front teeth. Slowly move your jaw from side to side. Increase the thickness of the object as the exercise becomes easier.
- Forward jaw movement: Place an object about one fourth of an inch thick between your front teeth and move the bottom jaw forward so that the bottom teeth are in front of the top teeth. Increase the thickness of the object as the exercise becomes easier.

These exercises should not be painful. If it hurts to do these exercises, stop doing them and talk to your family doctor.

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://www.familydoctor.org/>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.

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