TMJ:

More Than a Mouthful

TEMPOROMANDIBULAR JOINT

RADIATING PAIN MUSCLE STIFFNESS LOCKING OF THE JAW

Do you sometimes hear a weird clicking sound in your jaw when you yawn, chew, or maybe even open your mouth to say something? It may seem like nothing, but that clicking noise could be a sign of something bigger and potentially threatening to your oral and overall health: temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorder. That's quite a mouthful to say, but it could have even more than a mouthful of health implications.

An estimated 10 million Americans suffer from TMJ pains, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR). Common symptoms include pain in or around the ear, tenderness of the jaw, clicking or popping noises when opening the mouth, or headaches and neck aches. Most people suffering from TMJ disorders have relatively mild forms, where their symptoms improve significantly or disappear spontaneously within weeks or months, according to the NIDCR. However, for others, the condition causes long-term, chronic, and debilitating pain.

A variety of symptoms are linked to TMJ disorders, the most common being pain in the chewing muscles and/or jaw joint. Other symptoms include: radiating pain in the face, jaw, or neck; jaw muscle stiffness; limited movement or locking of the jaw; painful clicking, popping, or grating in the jaw joint when opening or closing the mouth; and a change in the way the upper and lower teeth fit together.

Just what is the temporomandibular joint and why is it so important? The TMJ is the joint connecting the lower jaw to the bone at the side of your head. This joint is flexible, allowing the jaw to move smoothly up and down and side to side, in turn enabling us to talk, chew, and yawn. In addition, there are muscles attached to and surrounding the jaw joint that control its position and movement, and when we open our mouths, the rounded ends of the lower jaw glide along the temple's bone socket. When we close our mouths, they slide back to their original position. To make the TMJ joint even more complex, a small disc lies between the lower jaw and the temple's bone, helping to keep these movements smooth and absorbing shocks to the jaw joint from chewing and other movements.

All of these parts make the TMJ one of the most complicated joints found in the human body, and because of its complex movement, the TMJ and its controlling muscles can pose a tremendous challenge to patients and health care providers alike when problems flare up.

According to the NIDCR, disorders of the TMJ and chewing muscles fall into three categories: discomfort or pain in the muscles that control jaw function; a displaced disc, dislocated jaw, or injury to the lower jaw; and arthritis in the TMJ joint. An individual may have one or more of these conditions at the same time.

Trauma to the jaw or TMJ can play a direct role in some TMJ disorders, but the cause for most TMJ problems is unknown, says the NIDCR. The symptoms can start without obvious cause. Stress and tooth grinding have been discussed as causes of TMJ disorders, but their role is unclear because not everyone with TMJ disorders grinds their teeth, and alternately, many longtime tooth grinders do not have painful joint symptoms. Other factors that relate to the way teeth fit together—the bite—may cause some types of TMJ disorders, according to the American Dental Association.

TMJ disorders may be treated in several ways. Your dentist will recommend what type of treatment is needed for your particular problem or recommend that you be referred to a physician or specialist. For most people, the discomfort that comes with TMJ disorders will eventually go away with little or no treatment, says the NIDCR. Some simple steps that may help temporarily alleviate the symptoms include eating soft foods, applying ice to the area, and avoiding extreme jaw movements like wide yawning and gum chewing. Short-term use of over-the-counter pain medicines and adoption of stress-reduction techniques have also been shown to provide relief.

Diagnosis is an important step before treatment, so be sure to see your dentist if you are suffering from any of the symptoms described in this article for an extended period of time.