

Treating Jaw Disorders

What is a Jaw Disorder?

During recent years dentists throughout the world have become more aware of the problems that can originate with the jaw (temporomandibular) joints.

It is not uncommon for people suffering from temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders to first consult a medical practitioner with complaints of pain, usually on one side of the face and neck. In some cases the pain is intense and may be in the region of the TMJ (located just in front of the ear) making eating painful and difficult. Frequently the sufferer is unable to open his or her jaws wide enough to insert normal amounts of food. Instead the food has to be cut into tiny portions.

Diagnosis can be difficult as the associated pain may not be restricted to the area of the joint, but may be referred to almost any part of the head or neck. Other complaints include constant or repeated headaches, clicking in the jaw joints, apparent attacks of migraine and even the symptoms of toothache. Neck pains from TMJ disorders may initially be attributed to something else altogether.

How Do Problems Start?

The jaws are controlled by a very fine balance between many muscles and ligaments which act together. Some of these muscles contract while others expand in various movements of the jaws. Sometimes, because of interference to the normal movement of the jaws the lower jaw deviates slightly and the muscles are thrown out of balance. If this is repeated often, one or more of the muscles may go into spasm (cramp) giving rise to severe pain. Teeth contacting unusually, or a poorly fitting denture may produce this response.

It is unlikely that the sufferer will be aware of the interference to the normal chewing pattern that set off the muscle spasm. This is likely to have developed slowly over many years.

Treating TMJ Problems.

Once the problem has been diagnosed, the pain can often be stopped very quickly if the interferences are eliminated. If the meshing of teeth is at fault, careful grinding down of the offending areas may achieve the desired result.

For instance, the cusps and grooves of the upper back teeth should fit snugly into the corresponding depressions and peaks on the biting surfaces of the back teeth in the lower jaw. If this snug fit does not exist, the dentist may attempt to reshape these cusps to correct the bite.

For some patients, it may be necessary for the dentist to make a small plastic appliance, called a bite plate, which fits snugly over the biting surfaces of the upper or lower teeth. The appliance is usually worn at night and, in some cases, during the day as well. The bite plate has the effect of separating the biting surfaces of the upper and lower jaws, thereby allowing the chewing muscles to relax. Once these relax the pain usually disappears.

To achieve a lasting result it may be necessary for the dentist to replace fillings or make a new denture.