

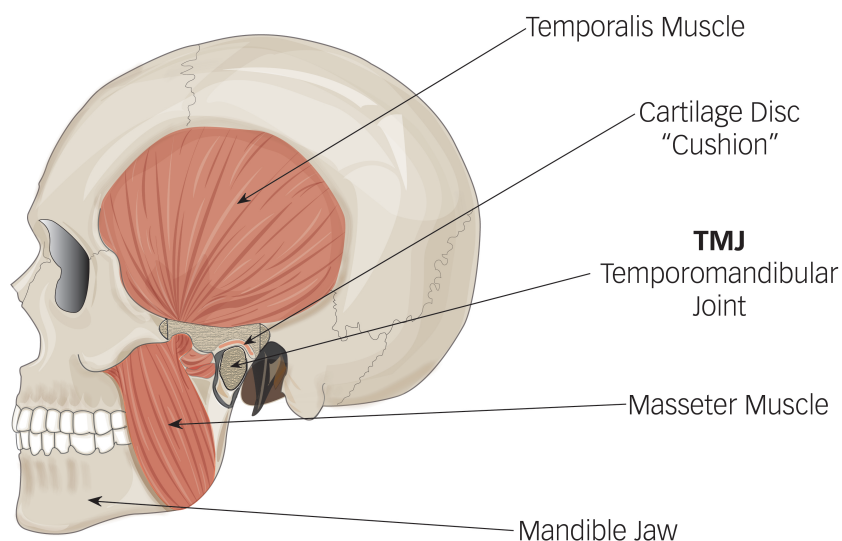


Jaw joint problems

Information for patients from Head and Neck

Where is the jaw joint?

The temporomandibular joint (jaw joint) is located in front of your ear where your skull and lower jaw (mandible) meet (see diagram). The joint allows your lower jaw to move and function. The joint is made up of two bones that are separated by a disc of cartilage. Ligaments and muscles surround the joint.



What are the symptoms of jaw joint problems?

Problems with the jaw joint are very common but typically only last a few months before getting better. In some instances only the muscles are affected (myofascial pain dysfunction) whereas in others the cartilages and ligaments may also be at fault (internal derangement of temporomandibular joint).

The most common symptoms are:

- **Joint noise** such as clicking, cracking, crunching, grating, or popping.
- **Pain**, usually a dull ache in and around your ear. The pain may radiate (move forwards) along your cheekbone or downwards into your neck.
- **Headache**.
- Not being able to **open your mouth** fully.

Most jaw joint problems are made worse by chewing and are aggravated when you are stressed.



What causes jaw joint problems?

- **Pain** is caused by the muscles in and around your jaw joint tightening up.
- **Joint noise** occurs if the disc of cartilage moves out of its normal position between the bones of your jaw joint. Most commonly, the cartilage slips forwards and a noise is made when it returns to its normal position in between the bones of your jaw joint. The noise sounds louder to some patients than others because the joint is just in front of your ear.
- The ligaments and muscles surrounding the **joint can in turn go into spasm**, producing pain and limited mouth opening.

Why have I got jaw joint problems?

The cartilage in your jaw is thought to slip forwards because of over-use of the muscles surrounding your jaw. The over-use commonly produces tightening of your muscles and may happen as a result of chewing habits, such as grinding or clenching your teeth when under stress or at night.

Nail biting or holding things between your teeth can also cause jaw joint problems. Less commonly missing back teeth, an uneven bite, or an injury to your jaw can lead to the problem. Often no obvious cause is found.

Are my problems anything to worry about?

Jaw joint problems are usually not serious and do not lead onto other problems such as arthritis of the jaw joint. They are however a nuisance. Fortunately jaw joint problems usually respond to simple treatments.

What are the treatments?

Treatments vary depending on whether you are suffering from myofascial pain dysfunction, internal derangement of the temporomandibular joint, or a combination of both. On the whole treatment is aimed at trying to reduce the workload of your muscles, allowing the disc of cartilage to return to a normal position in the joint.

- A **soft diet** that needs little chewing allows over-worked muscles to rest.
- **Painkillers/anti-inflammatory medication** (such as ibuprofen) is good and can be taken as either tablets or applied as a gel on the outside of your joint.
- **Heat** for example, warm water in a hot water bottle (avoiding boiling water) wrapped in a towel applied to the side of your face.
- **Identifying and stopping any habits**, such as clenching or grinding. Remember that these may be subconscious (you may not be aware of them).
- **Relaxation therapy** and learning techniques to control tensions and stress.
- **Jaw joint exercises** will have been discussed with you by your doctor. Please remember to follow them carefully.

- **Resting** the joint as much as possible - try to avoid yawning.
- Providing a **clear plastic splint** that fits over your teeth and is worn mainly at night. This helps support the joint and surrounding muscles.
- **Physiotherapy**.
- **Replacing missing teeth** to balance your bite. If this is appropriate it will have been discussed with you.

You and your doctor will discuss which of these treatment options is best for you.

What happens if these methods do not work?

Surgery is only carried out in a small number of cases, and involves manipulation of your joint whilst you are asleep or more rarely surgery carried out with a mini telescope. In extreme cases, it may be necessary to open the joint and operate on the bones, cartilages, and ligaments.

Are jaw joint problems anything to worry about?

It is important to realise that jaw joint problems, although a nuisance, are not sinister and usually respond to relatively simple treatment over a period of time. Patients themselves can manage most of these treatments. Occasionally jaw joint problems may return after several years. It is very rare for jaw joint problems to progress to arthritis.

This leaflet has been produced with and for patients

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