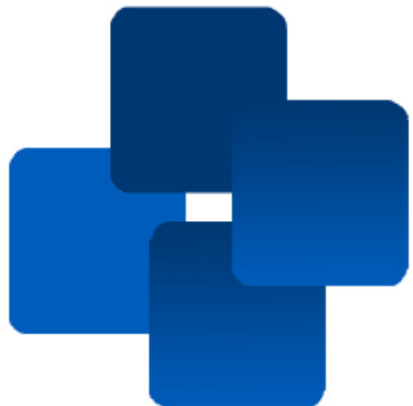


# Managing Temperomandibular Joint (TMJ) Problems

## Oral and Maxillofacial Department

The Temperomandibular joint (jaw joint) is just in front of the ear and allows the lower jaw to move and function. The joint is made up of two bones with a cartilage disc separating the two. Ligaments and muscles surround the joint.



The purpose of this leaflet is to help you understand and manage Temporomandibular Joint problems. Jaw joint problems are very common. Such problems can affect the muscles alone, the cartilage and ligaments or both.

### What are the symptoms?

- Pain. Usually a dull ache in and around the ear. This can also spread forwards along the cheekbone and downwards to the neck.
- Headaches.
- Limited mouth opening.
- Joint noise, for example clicking, cracking, crunching, grating or popping.

Most jaw joint problems are made worse by chewing and are aggravated at times of stress.

### What causes jaw joint problems?

Joint noise occurs if the cartilage disc moves out of its normal position. Most commonly it slips forwards and then clicks back into its natural position.

The noise may sound louder to some patients than others due to its proximity to the ear.

The ligaments and muscles can go into spasm (tighten) which causes difficulty in mouth opening and is painful.

There are a variety of causes giving rise to the muscle spasm:

- grinding or clenching the teeth when under stress or while sleeping.
- nail biting
- holding things between the teeth
- chewing gum regularly
- An uneven bite, in turn due to the tipping of some teeth and gaps left by extracted teeth.
- injury to the jaw

### What are the treatments?

There are a range of treatments and what is recommended for you will depend on what is felt to be the underlying cause of the pain. Generally treatment is aimed at reducing the workload of the muscles.

Treatments available include:

- Maintain a soft diet during symptomatic periods

- Apply heat e.g. hot water bottle (warm water not boiling) wrapped in a towel applied to the face or topical deep heat cream applied to the painful area
- Painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen taken in tablet form or applied in gel form to the painful area
- Identify and stop habits such as nail biting or grinding your teeth
- Rest the joint as much as possible. For example, avoid wide mouth opening and support the lower jaw when yawning
- Eat on the back teeth of the affected joint
- Massage the painful area
- Replace missing back teeth to balance the bite
- A clear plastic appliance can be made for patients who clench or grind their teeth at night. This appliance fits snugly over the bottom teeth and reduces pressure on the joints
- Some jaw joint exercises can be used to reduce the clicking sounds. These should only be used on the advise of the doctor.

## Exercises for clicking 'TMJ'

Only to be completed on the advice of the doctor.

The following exercise should be performed sitting up straight in front of a mirror so that you can see what you are doing:

1. Clasp both hands behind your neck to provide a 'headrest'
2. With your mouth closed and teeth lightly touching, contract the muscle beneath your chin attempting to pull your chin back into your neck without opening your mouth. By observing your chin and neck in the mirror it is possible to see the contractions of these muscles.
3. Do this exercise at least twice daily at first, and when confident for up to a maximum of 3-5 minutes every hour.
4. After a few days try small mouth opening movements, learning to open the jaw with a backward pull to avoid the clicking.

Initially these exercises may cause some pain. Continue with them and your 'clicking/popping' symptoms should reduce within 2-3 weeks

### Alternative exercise for 'clicking' TMJ

Only to be completed on the advice of the doctor.

1. Close your mouth on your back teeth, resting the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth just behind your upper front teeth.
2. Run the tip of your tongue backwards as far as it will go keeping your teeth together.
3. Attempt to open the mouth until you feel your tongue beginning to pull away from the soft palate (back section of the roof of your mouth).

4. Hold this position for five seconds and then close your mouth.
5. Relax for five seconds then repeat this exercise slowly for the next five minutes in a firm but relaxed fashion

The doctor will advise on the most appropriate exercise for you.

Although a nuisance, jaw joint problems are not sinister and usually respond to the simple measures explained in this leaflet.

Occasionally jaw joint problems can return in which case completing the methods in this leaflet should ease them again.

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Author: Max Fax Team

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