



What is TMD? And Do You Have It?

Health problems and the pain associated with disorders of the jaw joint (the temporomandibular joint) may seem to be mysterious and unexplainable to you, but there are growing numbers of [health care practitioners](#) who are qualified to diagnose and treat Temporomandibular Joint Disorders (TMD). While no amount of printed information can replace a complete examination by a qualified practitioner, it is often comforting to have some of your questions answered before taking that major step and making an appointment to consult "an expert".

Some patients live with TMD for years before it becomes painful enough to cause them to seek help. Others contract the problem suddenly -- usually by some trauma or blow to the head, face and/or neck region. But both types of patient can have very similar symptoms.

Even though a headache can be a sign of many kinds of health problems, frequent headaches are the most common complaints of TMD sufferers. Other common complaints can include clicking or popping jaw joints, pain when chewing or yawning, grinding or clenching your teeth, neck/shoulder pain, worn teeth, your teeth do not touch when you bite, "stiffness" in your jaw joints that makes it difficult to open or to close your mouth. Again, only a qualified health care practitioner can tell you for certain if any of these problems are a direct result of TMD.

Methods for successful diagnosis and treatment of TMD vary from patient to patient and from office to office. Some problems may require a "team-approach" which means several different health care practitioners may be working with you concurrently to help alleviate your problem. Treatment can take time and even the amount of time varies from patient to patient. Sometimes it even takes time to get an appointment with a qualified health care practitioner.

Here are a few suggestions you might follow to help if there will be a lapse of time before you can get an examination appointment:

- a. Ice packs are excellent in reducing pain and muscle spasm. Place ice packs over the temple area and side of the face for ten minutes, three or four times a day. Ice packs may be repeated hourly if you are in severe pain.
- b. Place yourself on a soft (not liquid) diet. Eat a good balanced diet consisting of foods like cooked whole grains, beans, vegetables, eggs, fish, cheese, ground meats, fruit, etc. Avoid foods like salads, apples, tostado chips, corn on the cob, hard breads, raw vegetables, steak, etc. **NO CHEWING GUM OR ICE!** By cutting your food into smaller pieces, you can avoid a great deal of chewing thereby eliminating additional stress to your jaw joints.
- c. As much as possible, consciously disengage your teeth -- keep them slightly apart except when chewing or swallowing. The rule to remember is "lips together, teeth apart".
- d. Your sleep position is vitally important. If possible it is best to sleep on your back, perhaps with a pillow under your knees if that is more comfortable. You may want to also use pillows to support your sides. This would discourage turning over while asleep. Do not use firm, full pillows under your head. There are various orthopedic pillows available that are helpful in reducing head and neck pain. A rolled bath towel placed under your neck instead of a pillow may be preferred. If you sleep away from home, take your neck pillow (or a towel) with you. **DO NOT SLEEP ON YOUR STOMACH.** If you must sleep on your side, put a pillow between your knees, a pillow between your arms and keep your head pillow from pressing against your TM joint. Do not sit or sleep under ceiling fans or vents as this will aggravate sensitive muscles and joints.
- e. Do not sit with your chin resting on your hand. Protect your yawns by placing your fist under your lower jaw to prevent an extra wide opening. When talking on the telephone, do not support the receiver with your shoulder.
- f. Practice good posture. Keep your head up, chin out, shoulders squared and back straight. Support your lower back when sitting. If you must sit for long periods of time (at a desk, in a vehicle, etc.) try to stand and move around frequently in order to adjust and stretch your muscles.

Remember -- these hints are not intended as a substitute for seeking professional help. While you will experience some minor relief when employing these techniques, they are not a permanent solution to the problem. Please contact a [trained clinician](#) of the American Academy of Craniofacial Pain as soon as possible.