

Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ) Dysfunction

Dr. Levi Merritt, DC, CPT, CHC

www.DocLevi.com

What Is TMJ Dysfunction?

The temporomandibular joints (TMJs) connect your lower jaw to your skull and allow you to chew, speak, yawn, and move your mouth. TMJ dysfunction occurs when these joints or the surrounding muscles become irritated, inflamed, or do not function properly.

Also Known As: TMJ Disorder (TMD), TMJ Syndrome

Common Symptoms

You may experience:

- Jaw pain or tenderness
- Facial pain
- Clicking, popping, or grinding in the jaw
- Jaw locking or catching
- Difficulty opening your mouth fully
- Ear pain or a feeling of fullness in the ears
- Headaches
- Neck and upper shoulder pain
- Pain with chewing, talking, or yawning

What Causes TMJ Problems?

TMJ dysfunction can be caused by one or more factors, including:

- Clenching or grinding your teeth
- Poor posture, especially forward head posture
- Stress and muscle tension
- Arthritis or inflammation of the jaw joint
- Injury to the jaw, face, or neck
- Problems with the way the teeth fit together

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis typically includes a review of your symptoms, health history, and a physical examination. Your provider may evaluate:

- Jaw movement and function
- Muscle tenderness
- Joint sounds (clicking or popping)
- Posture
- Neck function

X-rays, CT scans, or MRI studies may be recommended when significant injury or structural problems are suspected.

Treatment

Many people improve with conservative care, which may include:

- Heat or ice therapy
- Therapeutic exercises
- Soft tissue therapy and massage
- Manual therapy
- Postural correction
- Electrical stimulation, ultrasound, or laser therapy when appropriate
- Treatment of related neck and upper back problems

Patients who clench or grind their teeth may be referred to a dentist for a night guard or other dental treatment.

Prognosis

Most patients experience significant improvement with conservative treatment and self-care. Addressing contributing factors such as posture, stress, and teeth grinding can improve long-term results.

Typical Duration of Care

A common treatment schedule includes:

- 2 visits per week for 2 weeks
- 1 visit per week for approximately 8 weeks

Estimated Total: About 12 visits over 3 months, depending on the severity of symptoms and individual response to care.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Contact a healthcare provider promptly if you experience:

- Severe jaw pain after an injury
- Significant swelling of the face or jaw
- Fever along with jaw pain
- Sudden inability to open or close your mouth
- Difficulty swallowing or breathing