

# Jaw Joint Pain Could Be a Sign of TMJ Disorder

## **Contributor - Dr. Sean Tarpenning**

Ever feel like your mouth is stuck opened or closed or your jaw just doesn't want to cooperate like it should? Do you suffer from jaw joint pain? Many people experience both, and it could be a sign of what is referred to as TMJ. The more you know about TMJ, the more you will be able to help determine if it could be the source of your pain, and then seek the right treatment for it!

Many people who experience a severe jaw joint pain have the TMJ condition. TMJ stands for temporomandibular joint, which is the joint that hinges the jaw together on both sides of the face, just below the ear. Although TMJ actually stands for the joint

itself, people usually refer to the term to also describe problems associated with it. Others use TMD, to refer to a range of temporomandibular joint disorders. Because TMJ is the term that patients are most-familiar with, this article will refer to all designations of TMJ disorder simply as TMJ.

## **TMJ Defined**

The pain and disorders that people experience with the TMJ often happen between the ages of 20 to 40, are more common in women than in men, and can be the source of extreme pain and discomfort.





*There are many factors that can lead to TMJ pain*

The pains that people often feel that are associated with TMJ can be pain in the face, earaches, headaches, clicking or popping sounds when opening and closing the mouth, and tenderness of the jaw. Those clicking and popping sounds that the jaw may make are not always accompanied by pain; sometimes the noises are there, but there is no discomfort present. In addition, people may have difficulty chewing, biting, or being able to open their mouth. Some people may experience a feeling of their jaw being locked or stuck in the open or closed position.

TMJ problems, according to the National Institutes of Health, are brought on by certain structures being stressed. Those structures include the muscles of the neck, face and jaw, nearby ligaments and blood vessels, teeth, and the cartilage disk located at the joint.

Even though stress to these areas is believed to be a cause for many of the TMJ cases that are identified, there are still many other cases where a cause has not been identified. Some people believe there are additional factors that contribute to TMJ, including a

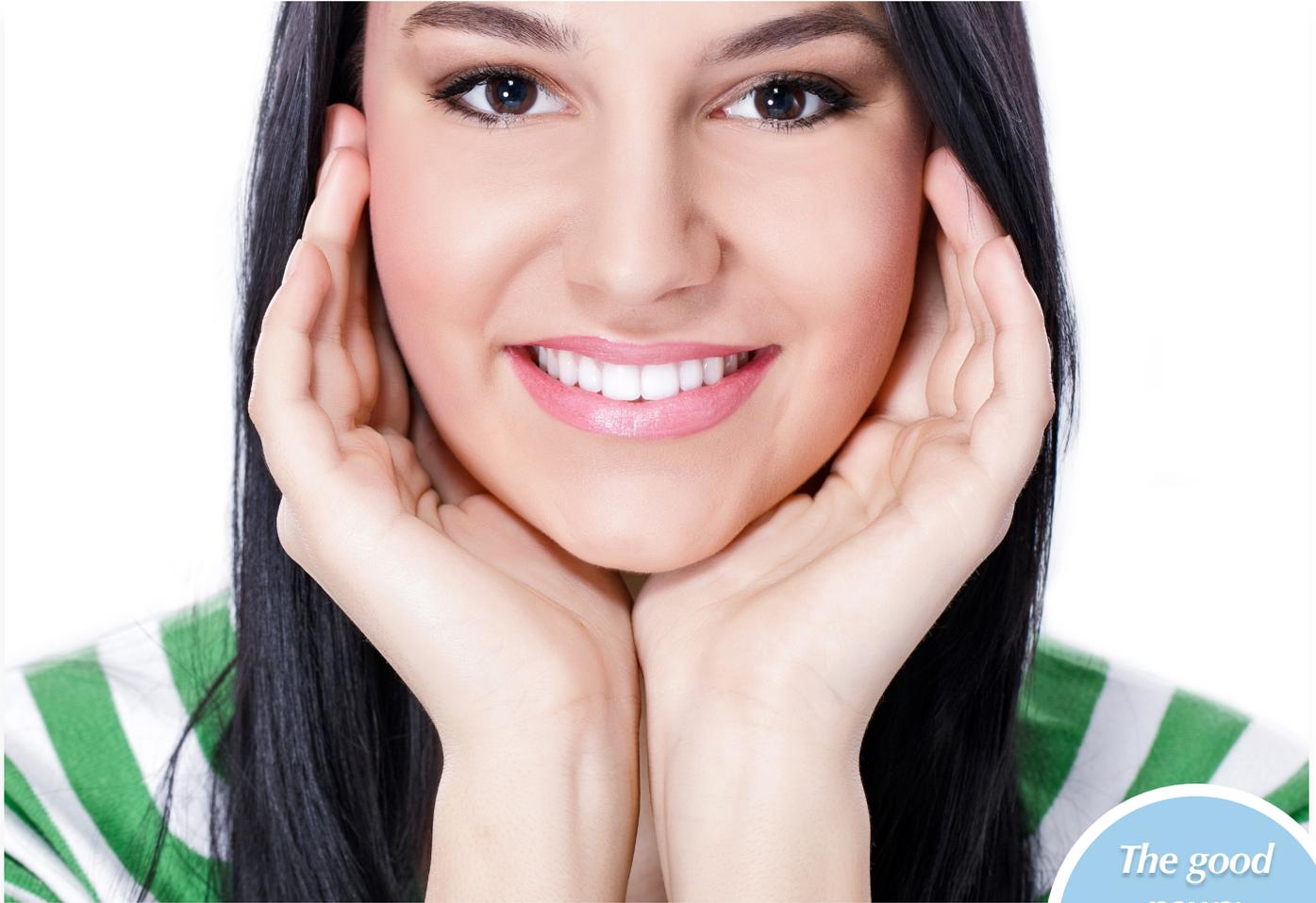
bad bite, tooth grinding, and poor posture while sitting at the computer.

In addition, there are factors that are believed to make TMJ worse, such as not getting enough sleep, having a poor diet, and being stressed out.

### **Diagnoses and Treatment**

If you feel you may have TMJ after learning about the symptoms, or you would like to be evaluated for it, the first step is to meet with an dentist. The dentist will perform an exam to help determine if you have TMJ, including reviewing bite alignment, feeling the joint and head for tenderness, sliding the teeth from side to side, analyzing the opening and closing of the jaw, and an x-ray or MRI, which could show any abnormalities in the area.

Depending on the dentist that you see, there are a variety of routes for treatment. So the good news is that they will be able to help you find relief if you are indeed suffering from TMJ. The various types of treatments for the disorder include relaxation therapies for the jaw, avoiding things like chewing gum, using



*The good news:  
help is available*

cold or heat packs, learning to de-stress, and increasing weekly exercise.

In addition and depending on the severity, you may also be prescribed medication to help alleviate the pain and reduce any swelling. Sometimes TMJ patients are also given devices such as splints and mouth or bite guards to help address the issue.

### **Moving Forward**

While we may not be able to exactly pinpoint one thing that leads to TMJ, it is believed that there are things that happen in life that can lead to it more than others. Those who may have been hit or even involved in car accidents may begin to experience the symptoms. Millions of people suffer from osteoarthritis or

rheumatoid arthritis, both of which can also be associated with the onset of TMJ.

The good news for those that suffer from the condition is that there is help available. People often fear visiting the dentist, which keeps them living in pain. It is really just a matter of consulting with an dentist to find a personal treatment plan. Before you know it, you could have the pain and discomfort in check and be back on your way to pain-free smiling!



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