

# TMJ

The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is located just in front of the ear and connects the temporal bone (the side of the skull around the ear) and the mandible (jaw). It is a small disc of cartilage that allows the mandible to slide when you talk or chew. Damage to the joint or spasm of the chewing muscles can cause significant pain and is called temporomandibular dysfunction (TMD).

## WHAT CAUSES TMJ PAIN?

In most patients, pain associated with the TMJ is a result of displacement of the cartilage disc that causes pressure and stretching of the associated sensory nerves. The popping or clicking occurs when the disk snaps into place when the jaw moves. In addition, the chewing muscles may spasm, not function efficiently, and cause pain and tenderness.

## WHAT CAUSES DAMAGE TO THE TMJ and what are the symptoms?

TMD can be caused by major and minor trauma to the mandible, dental grinding, excessive gum chewing, stress, malpositioned teeth, ongoing dental problems, recent dental work, and arthritis. Often, there is no obvious cause. TMD can present as mild to severe ear pain or pressure, sore jaw muscles, temple and cheek pain, jaw popping and clicking, locking of the jaw, difficulty opening the mouth fully, neck aches, and frequent headaches. Some people get ringing in their ears from TMD.

## HOW IS TMD TREATED?

Proper diagnosis of TMD begins with a detailed history and physical, including careful assessment of the teeth, occlusion, and function of the jaw joints and muscles. If symptoms have been present for less than 1 month, they will likely respond to simple remedies including eating soft foods, avoiding chewing gum, minimizing dental clenching, ibuprofen, and moist heat packs applied to the jaw for 30 minutes twice daily.

In cases of joint injury, apply ice packs soon after the injury to reduce swelling. Relaxation techniques and stress reduction, patient education, ibuprofen, aspirin, muscle relaxants, or other medications may also offer relief.

Persistent TMD is often treated with a dental appliance to properly position the jaw while sleeping and prevent grinding. Not all dentists treat TMD so we recommend asking your dental office directly if they deal with TMD. If not, Desert ENT or your dentist will be able to direct you to a TMD specialist.

