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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TMJ DISORDERS

Take a moment to think about what it is that makes it possible for us to eat, speak, make facial expressions, and perform every type of oral function on a daily basis. The answer is quite simple. Your left and right temporomandibular joints, which are located in front each ear on either side of your head, work in perfect harmony to facilitate a wide range of motion from moving your jaw up and down to forward, backward and side-to-side.

More commonly known as the TMJ, each temporomandibular joint along with its surrounding ligaments and muscles articulates the mandible (lower jawbone) with the temporal bone of the skull. Containing a shock-absorbing disc that sits between the ends of both sides of the lower jaw

and the corresponding concave depressions in the skull's temporal bone, the left and right temporomandibular joints are well-designed for all manner of oral function. Not only do they handle an enormous range of movement but they are also able to endure biting pressures that can be as much as 260 pounds of force at the molars.

Although your temporomandibular joints are equipped to handle the stresses of movement and the forces generated when biting, they can still become dysfunctional when overused, inflamed or injured. In fact, several problems can disturb this complex system of muscles, ligaments, discs, and bones, resulting in a painful and annoying TMJ disorder.

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), temporomandibular joint disorders (TMJ), also referred to as temporomandibular disorders (TMD), are the most common cause of chronic facial pain and jaw dysfunction. It is estimated that more than 10 million people in the United States are affected by temporomandibular joint problems.

TMJ disorders can fall into one or more of the following three categories:

- Myofascial pain refers to pain in the area of the jaw joint due to various causes of increased muscle tension and spasm
- Internal derangement involves displacement of the disc, jaw dislocation or trauma to the condyles of the jaw
- Inflammatory joint disease or arthritis

Factors that can increase your risk of developing a TMJ problem include bruxism (teeth grinding),



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dental or skeletal misalignment, oral trauma as well as degenerative changes associated with arthritis and other inflammatory musculo-skeletal disorders. A TMJ disorder can exhibit a wide range of uncomfortable and debilitating symptoms such as clicking, cracking or popping of the jaw with movement, earaches, ringing in the ears (tinnitus), headaches, facial pain, back and neck pain, vertigo, and muscle spasms as well as jaw locking and limited jaw movement.

To evaluate you for the presence of a TMJ disorder, your dentist will perform a thorough clinical assessment of joint symptoms and function. Special radiographic imaging and other diagnostic tests will be ordered as needed. The treatment of a TMJ disorder may include oral appliances such as night guards or stabilization splints to alleviate strain on the joints. Other types of therapy may include steroid injections, occlusal adjustments as well as orthodontic or prosthodontic

treatment to improve occlusion. For some people, a TMJ disorder can be resolved within a relatively short period, while for others it will continue to persist despite extensive therapy. In cases of persistent and debilitating TMJ problems, surgery may be recommended.

Patients with TMJ disorders are typically advised to eat soft foods, avoid extreme jaw movement such as wide yawning and gum chewing as well as practice relaxation techniques and apply ice packs or moist heat as directed. If recommended, a patient should follow the dentist or therapist's instruction for gentle stretching exercises. The short-term use of over-the-counter, non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs and pain medications can also help to provide relief. If not the dentist or physician may prescribe stronger pain or anti-inflammatory drugs, muscle relaxants or anti-depressants.

Your dentist will personalize your course of care to address the cause and severity of your TMJ symptoms to alleviate your

discomfort and get you back on the road to optimal oral health and function.