



TMJ vs. TMD

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“I have TMJ.” This is a common example of what people with jaw pain say. The truth of the matter is, everyone has TMJ. In fact, we all have two TMJ’s! TMJ simply means tempomandibular joint, which is the description of the two joints on each side of the jaw where the temporal bone and mandibular bone meet together. A more accurate description of jaw pain related to this joint is TMD. Tempomandibular disorder, or TMD, is the term for pain or dysfunction of the TMJ.

Clicking or popping within the TMJ is common and may or may not indicate problems. Just like in the rest of the body, occasional clicking and popping without pain is nothing to worry about. If these noises become painful or are associated with mechanical locking of the jaw, then we would classify this as TMD. Pain can be a result of problem with the muscles around the joint, ligaments or discs in the joint, or with the bones themselves. Any of these structures can create significant difficulty in chewing, sleeping, or even just daily life.

The good news about TMD is that in many cases pain and dysfunction can be resolved with simple changes to daily habits. The first line of treatment requires the person to look at oral habits which may be aggravating the underlying problem. A complete evaluation of symptoms and potential aggravating factors can be discussed with your physical therapist. Physical therapists are trained to understand and treat the bones and muscles of the jaw. In combination with changes to daily habits, treatment in physical therapy has been shown to significantly improve TMD symptoms to avoid surgical interventions. In rare cases, surgery may be required. Following surgery, physical therapists work closely with the patient to restore normal jaw motion without pain.

If you or someone you know is suffering from TMD, contact your local physical therapist to evaluate your symptoms and work to decrease your pain.