



Yvonne S. Hanley D.D.S.
Mark K. Murphy D.D.S.

TMJ Disorders

We see many people who seek care for relief from jaw pain, jaws that “get stuck”, or “locked”, or certain types of headaches or neck pain. These people commonly come in saying, “I think I have TMJ”. TMJ refers to the temporomandibular joints, which are located on either end of our lower jaw in the area in front of our ears. When there is pain or dysfunction associated with this area, it is referred to as TMJD (Temporo-Mandibular Joint Disorder) or simply TMD.

The temporomandibular joint is one of the most complex joints in the body. It acts as a ball-and-socket joint part of the time, allowing rotation of the jaw as you begin to open. It also acts as a sliding joint as the jaw opens wider, moves forward or moves side-to-side. As part of a comprehensive examination, we check the jaw joints including the muscles, bones, discs, and ligaments. Often, signs of jaw joint disorders are found which are not yet apparent to the patient. Examples include tender muscles, worn or loose teeth, limited range of motion and joint noises detected only with ultrasound equipment.

Dentists receive very limited training during Dental School in how to deal with TMD problems. Very few dentists choose to commit themselves to the additional training and discipline needed to successfully treat jaw joint problems. This area is not recognized as a specialty area, but could almost be considered as one. It has been said that it takes about fifteen years of diligence, continuing education and experience to reach the point of competence and confidence in helping people with problems related to the function of the jaw joints. This has proven to be true in our experience. Certainly, we are not able to “cure” everyone, but much like diabetes and high blood pressure, TMD can be “managed” with proper treatment and maintenance.

Most people would not consider letting their knee joints or backbone deteriorate if there was a way to control it. The TMJ is like other joints and should be protected from further damage. When you think about it, there probably is not another joint in the body that we use as much.