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Dealing with TMJ

Temporal mandibular joint issues are painful, but can be dealt with sometimes. *by Dr. Susan Maples*

Q. I wake up with a headache every day and sometimes my jaw makes noise. My friend says I might have TMJ. What's TMJ and what can I do about it?

A. TMJ stands for Temporal Mandibular Joint, the place where your lower jaw fits into your head. So, to say that "I have TMJ" is akin to saying "I have knee." In all seriousness, the TMJ is a mechanically complicated joint and to make matters worse, it is not a joint you can easily rest when it's sore, since you need it for eating, speaking, smiling and kissing. Jaw joint noise occurs when the disc (a little piece of cartilage that cushions the bone-to-bone joint) is slipping out of position. The tension headaches and pain you might experience are related to muscle spasms much like a charlie horse. That cramping in your muscles most often results from a disharmony between a healthy joint position and the way your teeth fit together. This bite/joint imbalance often creates interferences that you might try to grind out at night--hence the morning headaches. And, if you're suffering from jaw joint problems, chances are you're a woman. In fact, women are 9 times more likely to suffer from TMJ disorders than men.

There is hope! It is appropriate to consult your dentist or dental specialist for a TMJ exam and treatment consultation. A thorough TMJ exam, includes measuring your range of motion, load (pressure) tests, measuring the soreness of each masticatory (bite) muscle and listening with ultrasound to the sounds of each TMJ. A proper TMJ diagnosis will lead to the right solution for you to stabilize your bite and address your headaches and jaw pain. The remedy can be simple or not so simple, depending on the severity of the TMJ breakdown. But, it's worth your attention. You won't believe how your quality of life will improve when you wake up pain free every day!