

## **Jaw Problems – clicking? pain? locking?**

The Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is situated in front of the ear and forms part of the jaw. Problems stemming from the TMJ can be caused by poor posture (often associated with prolonged sitting position or a long session in the dentist's chair), a neck problem or secondary to trauma involving the head, the face or the neck (whiplash).

TMJ patients often present with the following signs and symptoms: pain and cracking on opening the mouth, headaches, ringing or feeling of pressure in the ears, and/or neck pain. Cracking is frequent and may be caused by displacement of the fibro-cartilaginous disk that is located in the joint or poor positioning of the bones that make up this joint.

A normal and healthy jaw joint does not make any noise. The jaw movement should be smooth and fluid, without deviating from side to side while opening and closing the mouth.

A muscle is responsible for pulling on the disc to move it forward and keep it in contact with the mandible as we open our mouth. If it is too tight or overactive, it can lead to displacement of the disc which can make a clicking noise. The back part of the disc is attached to the bones via ligaments, when these ligaments have been over stretched, either by trauma or by prolonged poor posture, the disc can also move forward out of its usual position and make the clicking noise.

So what can be done about this? The most important issue to address is to correct your posture as when you sit slumped over, the alignment of the head and neck is changed. The TMJ is not supposed to take the weight of the head but if the ears are in front of the shoulders, it leads to an increased load on your joint and the associated tissues, including the clicking disc. There are also some exercises that can be done to help retrain the proper use of the jaw muscles. The neck may also need to be stretched or strengthened. A manual therapist can assess what structures need to be stretched and what needs to be strengthened. The sooner it is done, the more easily you will be able to correct it. It is often possible that specific stretching techniques will need to be done on the front of the neck & chest. When we sit slouched forward, all of these structures become tightened and will therefore also pull on the jaw joint leading to changes in the movement pattern which can lead to clicking & pain.

Daily habits can also be detrimental to the health of our jaw. Holding the phone between your ear and your shoulder is a bad habit; if you work at a computer and need the phone, a headset is essential. Opening your mouth wide to take a big bite of food should be avoided as should be chewing gum. It may be necessary to consult a dentist that specializes in TMJ disorder to have a night splint or another type of appliance to decrease stress on your jaw. When you yawn, try to put your tongue to the roof of your mouth first, this will limit how wide you can open the mouth while yawning which will decrease the stress on the jaw joint.

Whatever the source of your problem, a physiotherapist will perform a detailed evaluation of your TMJ, your muscles and ligaments around the joint as well as your neck in order to establish a treatment plan that is complete and specific to you needs.

Some advice to improve or prevent jaw symptoms:

- Avoid eating food that is too large; it is better to cut the food into smaller pieces
- Avoid chewing gum – if you do chew, do so for short periods of time
- Avoid biting the ends of your pen or pencil or chewing on you tongue or inside of the cheek
- Always sit in a proper position, back supported, chin slightly tucked in, and ‘think tall’
- Breathe through the nose and not the mouth – an open mouth creates a traction force on the TMJ
- Wear your dentures; if you are missing teeth in the back of the mouth, consult you dentist. Missing teeth can be a source of imbalance in the TMJ and the surrounding musculature.
- Avoid clenching or grinding your teeth, especially at night

Do not hesitate to communicate with a physiotherapist if you have any further questions.