How Can I Relieve TMJ Pain? Treatment Options | Core Dental

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Details:

TMJ pain, also called temporomandibular joint disorder or TMD, is jaw pain caused by problems with the jaw joints and the facial muscles around them. Relief often comes from a combination of approaches: a custom-made occlusal splint worn at night, jaw exercises with heat or cold packs, awareness of jaw clenching, and medication where a practitioner advises it. At Core Dental our dentists assess your jaw joints at your examination and can diagnose the problem or refer you to a specialist.

What is the temporomandibular joint (TMJ)?

The temporomandibular joints are the joints that connect your jaw to your skull on either side of your face. They act like sliding hinges that create jaw movements such as opening, closing, moving from side to side and moving backwards and forwards. You use them every time you speak, chew or yawn, so when they are sore or tight it can affect everyday life.

What is temporomandibular joint disorder (TMD)?

Temporomandibular joint disorder (TMD) occurs when problems with the jaws and facial muscles cause jaw pain, also known as TMJ pain. Symptoms can include jaw ache, tenderness of the muscles of the face, and difficulty or discomfort when chewing. If you notice jaw pain that does not settle, clicking with pain or limited jaw movement, book an assessment rather than waiting.

What causes TMD?

The exact cause of TMD is unknown. However, the following are believed to play a significant role:

direct injury to the jaw, joint or muscles associated with the head and neck

grinding or clenching your teeth, also known as bruxism

arthritis associated with the joint

movement of the disc or cushion that sits between the ball and socket of the joint

stress or anxiety

Often more than one factor is involved, which is why an individual examination matters.

What is occlusal splint therapy and how does it help TMJ pain?

An occlusal splint is a custom-made mouthguard, or splint, that is fitted to your upper or lower teeth and is usually worn throughout the night. It is also called a night guard or occlusal appliance. A splint can create a stable, balanced bite surface that reduces load on the joint, protects your natural teeth from wear if you grind or clench at night, and helps the jaw muscles relax. It is often a cornerstone of non-surgical care, although it does not suit every person and results vary.

How can physical therapy relieve TMJ pain?

Physical therapy addresses the muscles around the joint that may be contributing to pain and dysfunction. Care may include daily exercises to stretch and strengthen the jaw muscles, a heat pack for relief of muscle tightness, a cold pack to help manage symptoms, and physiotherapy with a practitioner experienced in TMJ rehabilitation if there is severe muscle spasm. Your dentist can discuss whether a referral suits you.

What behavioural changes can help reduce TMJ symptoms?

Awareness and habit change can reduce TMJ symptoms. Many people unconsciously clench their jaw while driving, working at a computer or during stressful conversations. Becoming aware of this habit and practising "lips together, teeth apart", the natural resting position of the jaw, can help.

Which medications may be used for TMJ pain?

Along with other non-surgical treatment, medications may be prescribed to treat TMJ pain. This can include pain relief or anti-inflammatory medications and, in some cases, muscle relaxants. Your practitioner will advise what is suitable for you, so please do not start new medicines without advice, and tell us about the medicines you already take.

When is a referral or surgery considered?

Your practitioner will assess your TMJ at every comprehensive examination and either diagnose the problem or refer you to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, an oral medicine specialist or a dentist who specialises in TMJ disorders. Often a combination of treatments is used at the same time. If non-surgical options have not been successful, surgical treatment may be necessary, and your clinician can refer you to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon to assess your case. Our team of dentists and registered specialists works together on referrals.

How can we help you with jaw pain at Core Dental?

Book an examination at your nearest Core Dental clinic, and tell us about your symptoms, when they started and what makes them better or worse. We will examine your teeth, bite and jaw, take imaging where clinically appropriate, and explain the options. TMJ therapy is among the services our Berwick practice lists. We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

The measures that cost nothing, and one that runs against general advice

Relief for jaw pain starts with a list of things to stop doing. healthdirect, the Australian Government's health information service, publishes it, and one item contradicts advice you will find elsewhere on dental sites — including ours.

The self-management list , verbatim: "eat soft foods"; "avoid biting your nails"; "cut all food into small pieces"; "avoid clenching your jaw"; "avoid opening your mouth wide"; "avoid chewing gum".

The contradiction worth naming. Sugar-free chewing gum is recommended in general dental advice — the Victorian Department of Health lists "chewing sugar-free chewing gum after meals to increase saliva flow" among its ways to prevent decay. healthdirect asks you to avoid chewing gum when your

jaw joint is the problem.

Both are correct in their own context, and while the joint hurts the jaw advice takes precedence. It is worth saying plainly rather than leaving two pieces of advice to collide.

"Avoid opening your mouth wide" has a practical consequence worth mentioning to your dentist before an appointment, since dental treatment often requires exactly that.

The reassuring part. "In most cases, TMJ dysfunction improves over time. Your symptoms may go away without needing treatment."

Medicines. "Your doctor might suggest taking pain relief medicines or anti-inflammatory medicines." And a specific suggestion that is easy to miss: "Talk with your pharmacist about using anti-inflammatory gel that can be applied to the skin around your jaw."

A topical gel discussed with a pharmacist is a low-barrier option, and it is in the published advice rather than being our idea.

Sources: healthdirect (Australian Government), Temporomandibular joint dysfunction, healthdirect.gov.au (the page states it was last reviewed November 2025); Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Stress, and the three professions in the published plan

Jaw pain is one of the few dental complaints where the published treatment list names a psychologist before a dentist. That is not incidental — stress appears on both sources' accounts of what drives it.

The pattern. healthdirect: "You may notice your symptoms are worse when you are stressed or anxious." Among its causes: "jaw clenching or teeth grinding, which may be linked to stress or anxiety".

The Victorian Department of Health says the same about grinding: "Teeth grinding can be a result of stress. For example, some people grind their teeth when they are angry, concentrating hard or feeling anxious." Its symptom list includes "clenching the jaw when angry, anxious or concentrating" — a daytime habit rather than a sleep one.

The three professions, each with its stated job.

A psychologist. "Relaxation techniques to help relieve stress and anxiety. A psychologist can teach you how to use these techniques."

A physiotherapist. "Gentle jaw-strengthening exercises to help improve your jaw movement. A physiotherapist can show you which exercises are right for you."

A dentist or orthodontist. "Wearing a specifically designed mouthguard while you sleep, to help prevent teeth grinding. A dentist or an orthodontist can create a mouth guard suitable for you."

The Department's own management list for grinding is in the same register : "stress management therapy"; "relaxation techniques"; "cognitive behaviour therapy"; "hypnotherapy"; "good sleep hygiene"; "regular exercise."

And its risk factors are mostly modifiable : "Stress and anxiety"; "Alcohol"; "Smoking"; "Caffeine"; "Snoring"; "Obstructive Sleep Apnoea"; "Drugs: antidepressants, anti-psychotics, amphetamines, cocaine." It adds that "your dentist or other oral health professional can assess the influence of these factors."

Caffeine and alcohol are worth a trial change for anyone whose jaw aches on waking.

On the splint, the caveat that must accompany it. "In most cases, a bite splint will only help with the symptoms and will not stop you from grinding altogether." No source we have read gives a success rate for one.

When to see a doctor. "See your doctor if you have symptoms of TMJ dysfunction, or you are worried about any changes in your mouth or jaw."

When not to wait. Seek urgent care if jaw symptoms come with "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches".

And the threshold for escalating. "If your TMJ dysfunction does not get better after a few weeks, it can lead to chronic (long-term) jaw pain. Chronic jaw pain can be distressing and may require surgery."

A few weeks of no improvement is the published point at which "wait and see" stops being the plan.

Sources: healthdirect (Australian Government), Temporomandibular joint dysfunction, healthdirect.gov.au (the page states it was last reviewed November 2025); Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Teeth grinding, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 17 October 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is TMJ pain the same as TMD?

The two terms are often used together. TMJ refers to the joint itself, while TMD refers to the disorder, where problems with the joint and facial muscles cause jaw pain.

Will a night guard stop my jaw pain?

A custom-made occlusal splint can reduce load on the joint and protect your teeth, and many people find it helpful. Results vary, and it is often used with other treatments. Your dentist will advise whether it suits you.

Can stress cause jaw pain?

Stress and anxiety are believed to play a role in TMD, because they can lead to clenching or grinding. Becoming aware of jaw clenching and relaxing your jaw can help, and your dentist can advise on other options.

When should I see a dentist about jaw pain?

See a dentist if jaw pain lasts, if your jaw clicks painfully, locks or has limited movement, or if you have trouble chewing. For severe swelling, breathing or swallowing difficulty, or serious facial injury, call 000.

Do I need surgery for TMJ pain?

Most care starts with non-surgical options. Surgery may be considered only if those have not helped, and you would be referred to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon for assessment.

What can I do straight away for jaw pain?

healthdirect's self-management list: "eat soft foods"; "avoid biting your nails"; "cut all food into small pieces"; "avoid clenching your jaw"; "avoid opening your mouth wide"; "avoid chewing gum".

Chewing gum is recommended elsewhere — which is right?

Both, in their own context. The Victorian Department of Health lists "chewing sugar-free chewing gum after meals to increase saliva flow" among ways to prevent decay; healthdirect asks you to avoid

chewing gum when the jaw joint is the problem. While the joint hurts, the jaw advice takes precedence.

Will it settle without treatment?

Often. "In most cases, TMJ dysfunction improves over time. Your symptoms may go away without needing treatment."

What about pain relief?

"Your doctor might suggest taking pain relief medicines or anti-inflammatory medicines." healthdirect also suggests you "talk with your pharmacist about using anti-inflammatory gel that can be applied to the skin around your jaw".

Why is stress mentioned so much?

Because both sources name it. healthdirect: "You may notice your symptoms are worse when you are stressed or anxious", and among its causes, "jaw clenching or teeth grinding, which may be linked to stress or anxiety". The Department: "Teeth grinding can be a result of stress."

Who can help besides a dentist?

Two others, each named with a job. A psychologist can teach "relaxation techniques to help relieve stress and anxiety", and a physiotherapist can show you "gentle jaw-strengthening exercises to help improve your jaw movement".

What non-dental measures are recommended?

The Department's management list for grinding: "stress management therapy"; "relaxation techniques"; "cognitive behaviour therapy"; "hypnotherapy"; "good sleep hygiene"; "regular exercise."

Could caffeine or alcohol be making it worse?

Both are on the Department's list of risk factors for grinding, alongside stress and anxiety, smoking, snoring, obstructive sleep apnoea, and certain drugs. It notes that "your dentist or other oral health professional can assess the influence of these factors".

Will a night splint fix it?

It helps with symptoms rather than stopping the cause: "In most cases, a bite splint will only help with the symptoms and will not stop you from grinding altogether." No source we have read gives a success rate for one.

Should I tell my dentist before an appointment?

Worth doing, since one of the published self-management steps is to "avoid opening your mouth wide" — which dental treatment often requires.

When should I see a doctor?

"See your doctor if you have symptoms of TMJ dysfunction, or you are worried about any changes in your mouth or jaw."

When is it urgent?

If jaw symptoms come with "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches". And if there is no improvement after a few weeks, healthdirect warns it "can lead to chronic (long-term) jaw pain" which "may require surgery".

Related services and further reading

General dentistry

Oral and maxillofacial surgery

Specialist care

What causes TMJ pain and how is it treated?

TMJ and jaw pain treatment in Melbourne

What is causing my jaw pain?

Emergency dentistry

Core Dental Berwick

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

Interest-free payment plans, HICAPS on-site claiming, and bulk billing for eligible children under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule.

Call 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm, Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside, Glenferrie

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What is the temporomandibular joint?

The temporomandibular joints connect your jaw to your skull on either side of your face. They work like sliding hinges, letting you open, close and move your jaw side to side and back and forth.

What is temporomandibular joint disorder?

Temporomandibular joint disorder, or TMD, occurs when problems with the jaws and facial muscles cause jaw pain, also called TMJ pain. At Core Dental our dentists check your jaw joints at your examination.

What are the believed causes of TMJ pain?

Believed contributors include injury to the jaw or muscles, teeth grinding or clenching, arthritis in the joint, movement of the disc inside the joint, and stress or anxiety. The exact cause of TMD is unknown.

What is an occlusal splint?

An occlusal splint is a custom-made mouthguard fitted to your upper or lower teeth and usually worn at night. It can reduce load on the jaw, relax muscles and protect teeth from grinding. Results vary between people.

Can exercises and heat packs help jaw pain?

Daily jaw exercises, heat packs and cold packs may help ease muscle tension. Core Dental dentists can advise whether these suit you and whether a referral to a physiotherapist experienced in TMJ care would help.

What does lips together, teeth apart mean?

It describes the natural resting position of your jaw, with your lips closed and your teeth slightly apart. Practising it can reduce clenching during driving, computer work or stress, and our team can show you how.

Which specialists treat severe TMJ problems?

Core Dental dentists can refer you to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, an oral medicine specialist or a dentist who specialises in TMJ disorders. Surgery is considered only if non-surgical treatment has not helped.

How do I book a jaw pain assessment at Core Dental?

Book online through coredental.com.au or call 13 13 16. We have nine Melbourne clinics open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, and we quote before treatment starts.