What Causes TMJ Pain and How Is It Treated? | Core Dental

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Details:

TMJ pain usually comes from the temporomandibular joint, the joint in front of each ear that connects your jaw to your skull, or from the muscles that move it. Common contributors include teeth grinding and clenching, stress and muscle tension, a displaced joint disc, arthritis, poor posture, sleep apnoea and injury. At Core Dental our dentists examine your jaw, teeth and bite, then explain which treatment options may suit you, such as self-care, a splint or referral.

What is the temporomandibular joint?

The temporomandibular joint, usually called the TMJ, is the hinge and sliding joint that connects your lower jaw to the part of your skull just in front of your ears. You have one on each side, and they work together every time you speak, chew, yawn or swallow. Muscles, ligaments and a small cushioning disc help the joint move smoothly.

When the joint or the muscles around it become irritated or overloaded, people can feel pain, clicking, stiffness or difficulty opening the mouth. Healthcare professionals often use the term temporomandibular joint disorder, or TMD, for this group of conditions. TMD affects the jaw joints and the muscles that control jaw movement.

What joint problems can cause TMJ pain?

Some causes sit inside the joint itself.

Disc displacement. The small disc that cushions the joint can slip out of its normal position. This can produce a click or pop when you open or close your mouth, and in some people the disc stays displaced and the jaw may feel locked or limited.

Arthritis and joint degeneration. Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis can both affect the jaw joint. They can cause inflammation and gradual breakdown of the cartilage that protects the joint surfaces, which may lead to pain and stiffness.

Injury. A blow to the jaw, face or joint can damage the joint structures or push the disc out of place.

A dentist can examine the joint and, where it is clinically appropriate, arrange imaging to help work out what is happening.

Is teeth grinding linked to TMJ pain?

Yes. Teeth grinding and clenching, known as bruxism, is widely regarded as an important contributing factor that you may be able to influence. Grinding and clenching can place forces on the jaw joint and muscles that are well beyond those of normal chewing, and many people do it during sleep without knowing. Signs can include morning jaw ache, headaches around the temples, worn or flattened teeth and a sore or tired jaw.

If you suspect you grind your teeth, please mention it at your appointment. We can check your teeth for wear and talk through options that protect them and ease strain on the joint.

Can stress contribute to jaw pain?

Stress and anxiety often show up as muscle tension, and the jaw is a common place for it. Many people clench their teeth when they are concentrating, worried or tired. Psychological factors such as ongoing stress, low mood and long-standing anger are believed to play a part in how TMD develops and how persistent it becomes.

This does not mean the pain is imagined. The discomfort is real, and looking after the physical and the emotional side together often works well. If stress is a big factor for you, your dentist may suggest relaxation techniques, and your doctor can advise on wider support.

What other factors can lead to TMJ pain?

Several other things can add to jaw and facial discomfort.

Posture. Holding your head forward, for example over a desk or phone, can strain the muscles of the neck and jaw.

Sleep apnoea. Disrupted breathing during sleep has been linked with clenching and jaw pain in some people.

Habits. Chewing gum often, biting nails or pens, or resting your chin on your hand can overload the jaw.

Bite problems. Missing or misaligned teeth may change how the jaw closes, although the link between bite and TMD varies from person to person.

How is TMJ pain treated?

Treatment depends on the cause, so an examination comes first. Many people improve with simple, reversible steps, and your dentist will explain which options are reasonable for you.

Self-care. Eating soft foods for a short time, avoiding wide yawning and gum chewing, applying a warm compress and doing gentle jaw movements as advised can help settle sore muscles.

Stress and habit management. Becoming aware of daytime clenching and learning ways to relax the jaw can reduce strain.

Occlusal splints. A custom-made splint worn over the teeth, usually at night, may protect the teeth from grinding and reduce load on the joint. You can read more in our article on dental splints .

Medication and referral. Your dentist or doctor may suggest pain relief, and may refer you to a physiotherapist, doctor or registered specialist if the problem needs further assessment.

Results vary, and no single approach suits everyone. We will not recommend treatment until we have examined you.

When should you see a dentist about jaw pain?

Please book an appointment if your jaw hurts regularly, clicks painfully, locks or will not open fully, or if you notice headaches, ear pain or worn teeth that you cannot explain. If you cannot open or close your mouth at all, or you have facial swelling or difficulty breathing or swallowing, seek urgent medical help or call 000. For severe tooth pain, contact your nearest Core Dental clinic promptly.

Further detail from Core Dental

The following points are drawn from Core Dental's own published material on this topic. They are included here for completeness, and anything that applies to your own treatment should be confirmed with your clinician.

The condition is not life threatening and while it often presents as mild symptoms, it can be debilitating in severe cases. TMD is often managed, rather than treated or cured, and often the condition is mild and self-limiting. Usually less invasive options are used to reduce or alleviate the symptoms first. Sometimes devices such as occlusal splints are prescribed to prevent damage from grinding and to stretch and relax the muscles attached to the TMJ.

Six causes, and the honest seventh

Jaw pain is attributed to grinding more often than the published sources support. healthdirect, the Australian Government's health information service, lists six causes and then adds a seventh possibility that is rarely acknowledged.

The six , verbatim: "an injury to your jaw, head or neck"; "an uneven bite"; "jaw clenching or teeth grinding, which may be linked to stress or anxiety"; "wear and tear of your TMJ, usually caused by osteoarthritis"; "other joint diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or gout"; "dental (tooth) issues, such as new fillings or dentures that may cause you to have an uneven bite".

And the seventh. "You might have TMJ dysfunction without any obvious cause."

Three of these point away from the mouth entirely. Osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and gout are joint diseases, and jaw pain from any of them is a medical matter as much as a dental one — which is why healthdirect's instruction is to "see your doctor if you have symptoms of TMJ dysfunction".

And one points squarely at recent dental work. "Dental (tooth) issues, such as new fillings or dentures that may cause you to have an uneven bite." If jaw pain started after a filling, a crown or a new denture, that sequence is worth stating plainly to the practice that did the work. An uneven bite is itself separately listed as a cause.

What grinding does to the joint, as distinct from the teeth. The Victorian Department of Health's list of problems caused by grinding includes "strain on the jaw joint (temporomandibular joint)"; "pain or limited movement in the jaw joint"; and "sore jaw muscles" — alongside the tooth damage it causes.

So grinding is a genuine route to joint pain. It is simply not the only one, and the Department's own material does not support using it as a default explanation.

How the joint problem is identified. "Your doctor can diagnose TMJ dysfunction." The doctor will "discuss your symptoms", "carefully examine your jaw" and "ask about your medical history". Further tests may include an x-ray, a "computed tomography (CT) scan", a "magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan" or a blood test.

A blood test on that list is the clue that joint disease is among the things being ruled in or out.

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.

Treatment follows the cause, which is why the plan varies

Because the causes differ in kind, so do the treatments. The published lists make that explicit, and they also set out when to stop waiting.

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

Start with what aggravates it. "You can help improve your symptoms by avoiding things that can aggravate your TMJ." The 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".

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

Then three options matched to three causes. Relaxation techniques taught by a psychologist, where stress or clenching is driving it. "Gentle jaw-strengthening exercises to help improve your jaw movement", shown by a physiotherapist, where movement is the problem. And "wearing a specifically designed mouthguard while you sleep, to help prevent teeth grinding", made by "a dentist or an orthodontist", where night grinding is the cause.

With the splint caveat attached. The Department: "In most cases, a bite splint will only help with the symptoms and will not stop you from grinding altogether." No success rate for a splint appears in any source we have read.

Where grinding is the cause, the Department's plan has steps before the appliance : "repair of tooth damage"; "ruling out other types of tooth wear such as erosion"; "assessing risk factors including sleep disordered breathing". Its management measures are "stress management therapy"; "relaxation techniques"; "cognitive behaviour therapy"; "hypnotherapy"; "good sleep hygiene"; "regular exercise."

The symptoms that define the condition , for comparison with whatever you are experiencing: "pain in your jaw, especially when eating"; "an ache or pain in front of your ear"; "a locking sensation in your jaw, making it difficult to open your mouth"; "a clicking or grating noise when you chew"; "an uncomfortable or uneven bite"; "hearing problems, such as tinnitus (ringing in your ears)"; "swelling around your TMJ".

When it is urgent. Seek urgent care if those come with "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches".

And the point at which waiting stops being reasonable. "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."

On prevention , healthdirect's three measures are "managing your stress and anxiety levels"; "visiting your dentist regularly to prevent dental problems"; and "using a mouthguard at night if you grind your teeth".

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

What does TMJ stand for?

TMJ stands for temporomandibular joint, the joint that connects your lower jaw to your skull in front of each ear. People also use TMJ loosely to describe jaw pain, but the full condition name is temporomandibular joint disorder, or TMD.

Can teeth grinding cause jaw pain?

Yes. Grinding and clenching can overload the jaw joint and the muscles around it, leading to pain, headaches and worn teeth. Many people grind in their sleep, so a dental examination is a useful way to

check for signs of wear.

Does stress cause TMJ pain?

Stress can contribute. It often increases muscle tension and clenching, which can irritate the jaw. It is usually one of several factors, so your dentist will look at your teeth, joint and habits together.

Will I need a splint for TMJ pain?

Not everyone does. A splint may be suggested if you grind or clench, but some people improve with self-care and habit changes. Your dentist will explain whether a splint suits your situation after an examination.

When is jaw pain an emergency?

Call 000 or seek urgent medical help if you cannot open or close your mouth, have facial swelling, or have trouble breathing or swallowing. For severe tooth pain without these signs, contact your nearest Core Dental clinic promptly.

What causes jaw joint pain?

healthdirect lists six causes: "an injury to your jaw, head or neck"; "an uneven bite"; "jaw clenching or teeth grinding, which may be linked to stress or anxiety"; "wear and tear of your TMJ, usually caused by osteoarthritis"; "other joint diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or gout"; and "dental (tooth) issues, such as new fillings or dentures that may cause you to have an uneven bite".

Can there be no identifiable cause?

Yes. "You might have TMJ dysfunction without any obvious cause."

Is it always grinding?

No. Grinding is one of six listed causes. The Victorian Department of Health does confirm it can affect the joint — its list of problems caused by grinding includes "strain on the jaw joint (temporomandibular joint)", "pain or limited movement in the jaw joint" and "sore jaw muscles" — but it is not a default explanation.

My jaw started hurting after a filling. Is that connected?

It is a listed cause: "dental (tooth) issues, such as new fillings or dentures that may cause you to have an uneven bite". An uneven bite is separately listed too. Worth telling the practice that did the work.

Could arthritis be involved?

Three joint conditions are named: "wear and tear of your TMJ, usually caused by osteoarthritis", and "other joint diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or gout". That is one reason healthdirect's instruction is to see your doctor.

How is it diagnosed?

"Your doctor can diagnose TMJ dysfunction." The doctor will "discuss your symptoms", "carefully examine your jaw" and "ask about your medical history", and may order an x-ray, a CT scan, an MRI scan or a blood test.

What treatments are there?

Matched to the cause. Relaxation techniques taught by a psychologist; "gentle jaw-strengthening exercises to help improve your jaw movement" shown by a physiotherapist; and "wearing a specifically designed mouthguard while you sleep" made by "a dentist or an orthodontist". Pain relief or anti-inflammatory medicines may also be suggested.

What should I avoid in the meantime?

"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".

Where grinding is the cause, what comes before a splint?

Three steps in the Department's list: "repair of tooth damage"; "ruling out other types of tooth wear such as erosion"; "assessing risk factors including sleep disordered breathing".

Will a splint resolve it?

It manages symptoms. "In most cases, a bite splint will only help with the symptoms and will not stop you from grinding altogether."

What symptoms mean urgent care?

Jaw symptoms together with "vision problems, such as double vision or blurred vision", "difficulty eating or drinking", or "frequent and severe headaches".

How long should I give it?

A few weeks. "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."

Related services and further reading

Can I relieve TMJ pain?

TMJ and jaw pain treatment in Melbourne

What are dental splints?

How can I stop grinding my teeth?

Ways to manage grinding teeth

General dentistry

Specialist care

Emergency dentistry

How can we help?

If you have jaw pain, clicking or headaches, our team can examine your jaw, teeth and bite at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online, and tell us about your symptoms so we can allow enough time. We quote before treatment starts, and interest-free payment plans are available for eligible treatment.

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, with Monday to Friday hours to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Contact Core Dental

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

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

Where is the temporomandibular joint located?

The temporomandibular joint, or TMJ, connects your lower jaw to your skull in front of each ear. Dentists at Core Dental assess it when patients report jaw pain, clicking or limited opening.

What condition is usually behind TMJ pain?

TMJ pain is commonly linked to temporomandibular joint disorder, known as TMD, which affects the jaw joints and the muscles that move the jaw. Core Dental dentists examine the joint, teeth and bite to work out the likely cause.

Which joint problems can cause jaw pain?

Disc displacement, where the cushioning disc shifts and may cause clicking or locking, and arthritis such as osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis can both cause jaw joint pain. Injury to the jaw can also damage the joint.

Is bruxism linked to jaw pain?

Yes. Bruxism, meaning grinding or clenching the teeth, can place heavy load on the jaw joint and muscles. Core Dental dentists check for worn teeth and talk through options such as a night splint.

Can stress and anxiety lead to TMD?

Stress and anxiety often increase jaw muscle tension and clenching, and psychological factors are believed to play a part in TMD. Core Dental dentists consider habits and stress alongside the physical examination.

What lifestyle factors can add to jaw pain?

Forward head posture, sleep apnoea, frequent gum chewing, nail biting and injury to the jaw can all contribute. Core Dental dentists ask about these when assessing jaw pain.

How does Core Dental treat TMJ pain?

Our dentists begin with an examination, then may suggest self-care, habit changes, a custom splint or referral to a doctor, physiotherapist or registered specialist. Treatment depends on the cause and varies for each person.

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

Call 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au for any of our nine clinics. Tell our team about your symptoms when you book so we can arrange a suitable examination time.