Migraine Trigger Guide:

Jaw

Explanation

Temporomandibular Joint Disorder (TMJ or TMD) is a descriptive term that refers to any disorder of the jaw joint.

What that disorder is, how that disorder is affecting your ability to chew and live, its causes, and the degree of the problem are all part of the diagnosis.

The diagnosis is primarily made by an oral and maxillofacial (OM) surgeon.

Trigger causes

OM surgeons often use CT scanning and MRI analysis to understand the hard and soft tissue effects of the primary disorder.

They can also use blood tests to help support a diagnosis (for instance for rheumatoid arthritis), and also use clinical assessment of your joint function (by assessing the opening and closing functions of the joints).

Some factors that may lead to TMJ include:

- Your bite: the bite has a serious influence on jaw joint health and jaw joint motion (through chewing). Having a perfect bite, with perfectly interdigitating teeth, means your jaw joints can function and glide normally, without having to compensate for the effects of a bad bite.
- Grinding your teeth: the important rule is not to overuse your jaw joints.
- Grinding your teeth throughout the night, under load, so that you can be heard, will lead to a number of things...
- Teeth that are worn down, past what is naturally normal
- Tired aching jaw muscles, that are tender to the point of palpation, and
- Sore jaw joints

How do you know if this is an issue?

It may be worth getting checked by a professional (such as a dentist or OM
surgeon) if you experience the below:

- Fatigue, stiffness or soreness in the jaw muscles or joints
- There may be a change to your bite, or how your teeth come together
- There is clicking or grating inside the jaw joint
- The joints are tender when you push on them with a finger
- There is sometimes an earache or a feeling of water in the ears
- You may not be able to chew very well or comfortably
- You may not be able to open your mouth widely
- Occasionally you cannot close your jaw, or get your teeth together
- The muscles of mastication (chewing) are in spasm and usually also sore
- There is clicking, popping or grating inside the jaw joint
- Less often a vague dizzy feeling may also be felt
- You experience ear problems stemming from TMJ which may include pain in the ear or ear ache, a muffled, clogged feeling in the ears and/or a ringing in the ears known as tinnitus

Options to try

Diagnosis by a health professional is important in determining the most effective treatment. Treatments vary depending on the primary cause.

- Avoid grinding your teeth: grinding your teeth places undue stress on your jaw joint and has been linked to TMJ.
- Reduce and/or manage stress: Stress can cause an involuntary flexion of the muscles in your jaw. Like grinding your teeth, this places pressure on your jaw joint and may be a contributing factor.
- Visit your doctor to catch early signs of arthritis.
- Visit your dentist twice a year for examinations and cleanings. Not only do these visits keep your teeth and gums healthy, they can provide your dentist with indications of TMJ before it becomes severe.
- Be aware of hidden dangers in seemingly innocuous activities such as:
  - Chronic nail biting
  - Crunching ice
  - Opening things with your teeth
  - Chewing gum
  - Biting off threads and fishing line
- Singers and musicians are well advised to have a stretch and exercise regime for the jaw, for prevention, post performance recovery and enhanced technique.
- Also beware the ‘party trick’ of jamming a whole fist in your mouth or other such feats. Those who are otherwise naturally flexible can end up with a very sore and sometimes locked jaw.

For those who are experiencing acute (strong) pain of the jaw joint and muscles
used in chewing health professionals may prescribe:

1. Rest: Soft diet, avoid chewy, sticky and tough foods, cut food into small pieces. Avoid gum and sweets. Avoid opening the mouth too wide and limit speaking for long periods. Avoid clenching your teeth, make a conscious effort to separate your upper teeth from the lower teeth during the day.

2. Anti-inflammatory medication: This can help, but only under the care and recommendation of a qualified health professional.

3. Muscle relaxants. If muscles have become severely inflamed they have restricted motion because they’re in spasm. In this situation muscle relaxants may be an appropriate option to treat muscles which have become excessively contracted or hyperactive.

4. Moist mild heat pack: Use for 20 minutes 3x per day.

5. Night guard or occlusal splint: A properly fitted night guard made by a dentist, will aid in stopping or minimizing night time grinding so the muscles can relax.

6. Physiotherapy: Seek out a physiotherapist who has a focus on head and neck physiotherapy. They can use other treatments such as manipulation, exercise, ultrasound, TENS etc.

Watch-outs

- Stress doesn't necessarily cause TMJ, but it can certainly make it worse.

More reasons to manage this trigger

- Overnight teeth grinding can cause problems with your jaw joints.
  - These include meniscal perforation and wear, long term osteoarthritis, joint capsulitis and joint sprain, local muscle fatigue and masticatory muscle hypertrophy and tenderness, and internal joint derangement with discal dislocation (and joint clicking).
  - All of these diagnoses come under the banner of “temporomandibular joint disorder.”