

Orofacial pain

What is orofacial pain?

Orofacial pain includes a number of clinical problems involving the chewing (masticatory) muscles or temporo-mandibular joint. Problems can include temporo-mandibular joint discomfort; muscle spasms in the head, neck and jaw; migraines, cluster or frequent headaches; pain with the teeth, face or jaw; or anxiety or depression. You swallow approximately 2,000 times per day, which causes the upper and lower teeth to come together and push against the skull. People who have an unstable bite, missing teeth, or poorly aligned teeth can have trouble because the muscles work harder to bring the teeth together, causing strain. Pain also can be caused by clenching or grinding teeth, trauma to the head and neck, or poor ergonomics. Some may experience pain in the ears, eyes, sinuses, cheeks or side of the head, while others experience clicking when moving the jaw or even locking if the jaw is opened or closed.

Temporomandibular disorders (TMD)

The National Institutes of Health estimates that more than 10 million Americans have TMD, or problems affecting the jaw joint and/or muscles. Your temporo-mandibular joints are located where the skull connects to your lower jaw. To feel these joints, place your fingers in front of both ears and open your mouth. The muscles on the sides of your head and face control the joints' movements. Researchers believe women between 20 and 40 are most likely to suffer from TMD because of the added estrogen in their bodies.

Headaches

One in eight Americans suffers from headaches. Experts estimate that 80 percent of all headaches are caused by muscle tension, which may be related to the bite. Headaches also can be caused by clenching jaw muscles for long periods of time. Signs that may indicate a headache from a dental origin include:

Pain behind the eyes

Sore jaw muscles or "tired" muscles upon awaking

Teeth grinding

Clicking or popping jaw joints

Head and/or scalp is painful to the touch

Earaches or ringing

Neck, shoulder or back pain

Dizziness

Sleep disorders

If you have gone through treatment and still experience orofacial pain, you may have a sleep disorder, such as bruxism, or a sleep-related breathing disorder, such as snoring or sleep apnea. Bruxism is the technical term for grinding and clenching. Snoring that goes undiagnosed may lead to an increased tendency for the airway to collapse, leading to sleep apnea. Sleep apnea is a condition when the tissues and muscles in the back of the throat collapse the airway. This can cause a person to wake up multiple times in the middle of the night, sometimes without knowing it.

Are there any treatments, available?

Your dentist has a variety of treatments that will help alleviate your orofacial symptoms. One device is called an orthotic, or splint, that is worn over the teeth until the bite can be stabilized. Permanent correction may require reshaping teeth, building crowns, orthodontics, or a permanent appliance for the mouth. Your dentist might also recommend physical therapy, counseling, relaxation training or massage therapy.

What else will my dentist do?

Your dentist can help. He or she will take a medical and dental history to determine if any trauma has occurred in the facial area, perform a physical examination to examine your temporomandibular joint, and look at head and neck structures. Maintaining or correcting your bite ensures optimal health, and proper care will help reduce or eliminate orofacial pain or discomfort.