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Ask The Expert: Jaw Clicking

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Q: My jaw has recently started clicking, especially when I eat. It doesn't hurt...

...but I'm worried it's getting worse. Should I get it checked out by a dentist? What could be wrong?

A: Jaw clicking is categorized under temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJD), which is a general term describing a variety of signs and symptoms people experience in the head, neck

and jaw area. If the joint is damaged people may report clicking, popping, locking and/or soreness just in front of the ear. Other common symptoms associated with TMJD include sore jaw muscles, headaches, bite related problems, neck issues, ringing in the ears, bruxism (teeth clenching and grinding) and sinus-like concerns.

If it's not treated, some people report increasing chronic pain and discomfort over time. This may include joint pain as well as reduced jaw mobility and inability to function normally. However most people do not have pain associated with clicking. In fact, the clicking may simply disappear. (The clicking occurs when the disc or cartilage pops in or out of the proper position.) This is often a sign that the ligaments holding the TMJ disc have been loosened. It tends to resolve and the body adapts.

If it doesn't or symptoms worsen, a dentist's primary therapy includes an orthopaedic bite guard or splint (which can range in price from \$450 to \$2,000) that can decrease stress in the joint and reduce muscle hyperactivity associated with facial soreness. This may be followed with bite treatment through bite adjustment (equilibration), orthodontics or restorative dentistry as needed. Physical therapy can be helpful with sore muscles and neck/posture issues, and medications for inflammation, muscle relaxation and sleep are commonly used for TMJD. Serious joint problems may occasionally require surgical intervention but this is uncommon. Treatment that is initiated at an early stage of discomfort can often be quickly resolved.

It can be challenging to find a dentist who can help since there is no specialty for TMJD. Commonly made bite guards generally are not effective and may even lead to a worsening of signs and symptoms of TMJD. It will be important to ask a dentist whether they have experience with treating TMJD.



-Dr. Brian S. Friedman, DDS, <http://www.drbrbrianfriedman.ca>

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