Guide

Tips for managing TMJ symptoms at home

A guide for people living with temporomandibular joint disorder



TMJ CLINICS

tmjclinics.com.au

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Introduction: Understanding your TMJ journey

TMJ disorder is a challenging condition to live with, involving ongoing pain, clicking or popping sounds in your jaw and a range of other symptoms. Finding knowledgeable practitioners whose advice improves your quality of life isn't easy either – many TMJ patients experience a frustrating medical merry-go-round before finding someone who can help.

This booklet is designed for people like you – people dealing with jaw pain, clicking sounds, bruxism (teeth grinding), headaches, and limited jaw mobility while also trying to work, study, manage your family responsibilities and maintain your social life!

As Australia's foremost provider of multidisciplinary care for TMJ, we'll show you evidence-based strategies for at-home TMJ care. You'll learn about TMJ disorder, how to reduce discomfort and when to seek professional help.



Chapter One

Understanding TMJ disorder

Despite its prevalence, TMD is not a well-understood condition. Most people have never heard of the TMJ until they develop symptoms relating to it. Some healthcare professionals only received a basic education in TMJ as part of their training.

1.1 What is TMJ and TMJ disorder (TMD)?

The **temporomandibular joint (TMJ)** is a crucial hinge that connects your jaw to the skull. This joint allows your jaw to move up and down and side to side so that you can speak, chew, and swallow.

TMJ disorder (TMD) refers to more than **30 conditions** that affect the jaw joint and the muscles that control jaw movement. When these structures become misaligned, inflamed, or injured, they trigger distressing symptoms.

1.2 Self-assessment quiz

Think you may have TMJ disorder? It can involve a **variety of symptoms.** You're unlikely to have all of them, thankfully, but you may find that you tick several boxes – and if you do, it might be time to explore further treatment options.

TMJ symptoms:

- Jaw pain or tenderness
- Clicking, popping, or grinding sounds (crepitus)
- Limited jaw movement or locking
- Headaches, including migraines
- Ear pain or ringing in the ears (tinnitus)
- Teeth grinding (bruxism) and clenching
- Neck and shoulder pain
- Pressure behind the eyes.

Some of those may seem surprising at first but they make sense. For example, many TMJ patients first complain of ear pain rather than jaw pain. That's because your jaw and ear share a nerve pathway. TMJ dysfunction can irritate the nerves and muscles connecting to your ear, causing pain, fullness or tinnitus.

1.3 What could be causing your TMJ pain?

TMJ pain can arise from multiple sources:

Physical injury (trauma): A blow to the face or jaw can damage the TMJ.
Arthritis: Conditions like osteoarthritis can lead to joint degeneration.
Bruxism (teeth grinding): This can cause muscle fatigue and joint strain.
Psychological stress: Stress often leads to jaw clenching and bruxism.
Posture and malocclusion: Poor posture and misaligned teeth can strain the jaw.

1.4 The impact on daily life

TMD symptoms can **significantly affect your daily life.**

SYMPTOM	IMPACT
Pain & discomfort	Disturbed sleep, fatigue, irritability, anxiety or depression.
Jaw stiffness & restricted mobility	Difficulty talking can affect communication and add to a sense of isolation.
Difficulty chewing	Unwelcome diet change to focus on soft foods, care needed to maintain nourishment.
Disturbed sleep	Increased fatigue, which can affect your mood, relationships and social life as well as your concentration and professional or academic performance.



TMD cannot be treated as simply a set of symptoms. It requires holistic care that recognises TMD's wide-ranging impact on your life.



Chapter Two

Practical at-home strategies for TMJ symptom relief

Like other chronic conditions, self-management plays an important role in living well with TMD. So, what can you do at home to relieve TMJ symptoms?

2.1 Gentle jaw exercises for mobility and pain relief

Gentle jaw exercises can help to improve mobility, reduce tension and strengthen the muscles around the TMJ.

It's wise to consult a physiotherapist with experience in managing TMD as they can develop a tailored treatment plan and show you how to perform exercises properly.

Common TMJ exercises include:

Chin tucks: Tuck your chin back, like you are making a 'double chin', hold for a few seconds, and then release slowly. This can help relieve neck stiffness and jaw pain.
Goldfish exercises: Seal lips closed, hum, then gently open your mouth as if saying "more". Repeat, focusing on relaxing your face.
Side-to-side jaw movements: Keeping your lips sealed, move your jaw from side to side slowly to maintain flexibility.
Tongue placement: Be aware of your tongue placement; let your tongue rest in the bottom of your mouth with the tip curled up



2.2 Heat and cold therapy

Heat therapy is ideal for chronic or dull pain, while cold therapy helps reduce inflammation and swelling.

Here's how to use them:

Heat therapy: Apply a warm compress for 10–20 minutes to relax muscles.
Cold therapy: Apply a cold pack wrapped in a cloth for 10–15 minutes to reduce inflammation, especially during flare-ups.

2.3 Mindful eating & TMJ-friendly diet

A diet designed to reduce strain on your jaw can help manage TMJ symptoms.

Dietitians may recommend:

Eating soft, easy-to-chew foods like mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, and smoothies.
Incorporating anti-inflammatory foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish, flaxseed, and walnuts.
Avoiding hard, chewy, and sticky foods that require excessive chewing, such as raw carrots, nuts, and chewing gum.
Following TMJ eating tips such as cutting food into small pieces, chewing on both sides of your mouth and not opening your mouth too wide.



Chapter Three

Lifestyle adjustments for lasting TMJ comfort

Lifestyle modifications can also help to ease TMJ symptoms.

3.1 Managing stress

Stress is a significant trigger for TMJ symptoms. Stress hormones like cortisol can cause jaw clenching and muscle tension, making TMJ symptoms worse.

To manage stress, try to:

- **Take time each day to practice mindfulness or guided breathing exercises.**
- **Focus on releasing tension from the neck and jaw muscles.**
- **Avoid rushing through meals and take time to chew slowly.**

3.2 Posture power

Poor posture, especially forward head posture (tech neck), can strain your jaw muscles.

To improve your posture and relieve jaw strain:

- Ensure your head is aligned over your spine.
- Set up an ergonomic workspace.
- Incorporate core-strengthening exercises and neck stretches into your routine.

3.3 Sleep habits and TMJ

TMJ discomfort can negatively affect your sleep. Try to:

- Avoid sleeping on your stomach as this can strain your jaw and neck.
- Use supportive pillows to encourage proper alignment of your head and neck during sleep.

3.4 Breaking bad habits

- Be mindful of habits that exacerbate TMJ symptoms, such as nail biting or using your teeth as tools.
- Regularly check your posture during the day and try to avoid clenching or grinding your teeth.



Chapter Four

Knowing when to seek help – your pathway to professional diagnosis and care

If you've tried self-care strategies and are still experiencing persistent or worsening symptoms, it may be time to seek professional help. This is especially true if your symptoms are significantly affecting your daily life.

4.1 The importance of accurate diagnosis

Unfortunately for most patients, the pathway to a TMJ diagnosis is not always straight forward.

If your doctor, dentist or physiotherapist doesn't link your symptoms to TMD, you're likely to be misdiagnosed and referred to the wrong professional, which delays treatment and incurs unnecessary costs.

4.2 Ensuring you're referred to the right place

When you're living with ongoing pain that's reducing your quality of life, you need to find the shortest route to an accurate diagnosis.

That's why we encourage you to **ask your GP for a referral to TMJ Clinics.** Our sole focus is on diagnosing and treating TMD. With many years of experience in this field, we've developed a rare degree of expertise in supporting patients with TMD through a multidisciplinary approach.



4.3 The Progressive Nature of TMJ Disorders

The diagram on page 17 shows how temporomandibular joint (TMJ) conditions can change and progress over time. Think of it as a journey — starting with early muscle tension and moving through to irreversible joint changes if left untreated.

Muscular Symptoms (Early Stage)

At first, TMJ problems often begin with muscle tightness or pain around the jaw, face, or neck. You may notice jaw discomfort, tension headaches, or pain when chewing. At this stage, the joint itself is usually still healthy.

Clicking (Intermediate Stage)

As the jaw joint becomes strained, you might start to hear or feel clicking or popping sounds when opening or closing your mouth. This happens because the disc inside the joint may move out of its normal position. Pain or stiffness can come and go.

Catching and Locking (Advanced Stage)

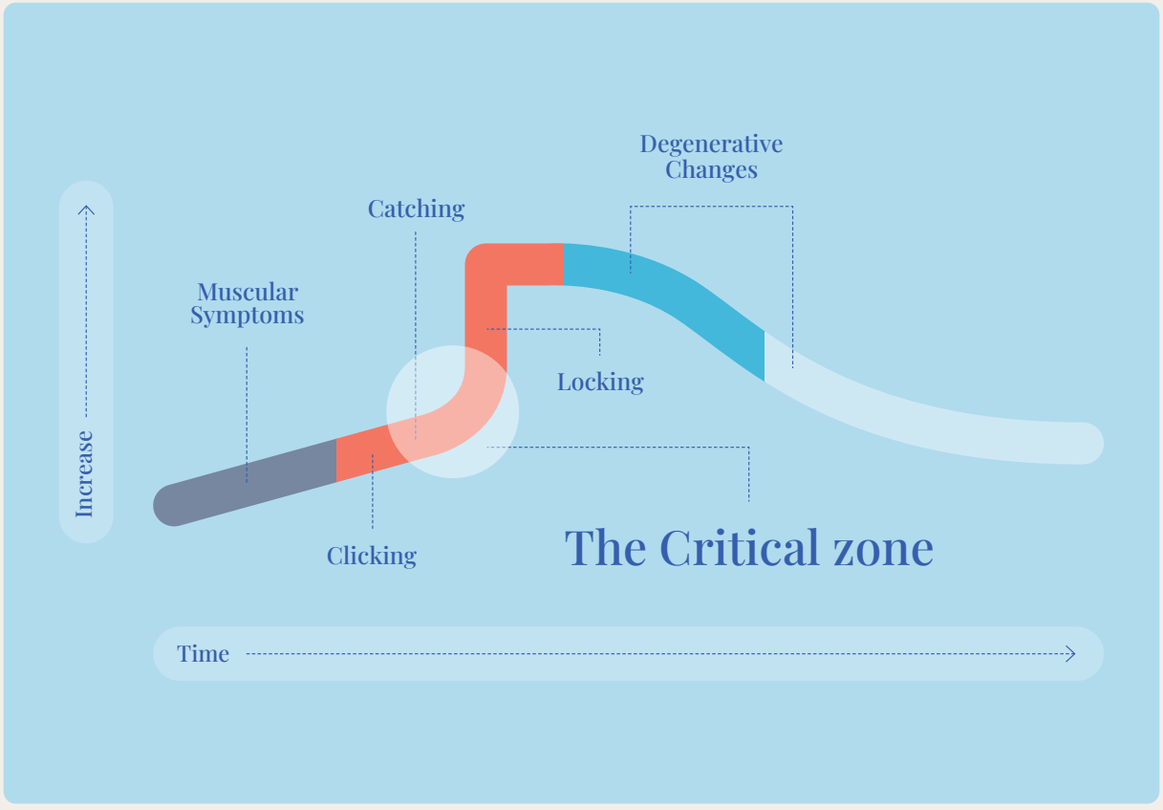
Over time, the joint may catch or temporarily lock, making it harder to open or close your mouth smoothly. This suggests that the joint structures are not moving properly and may be becoming more damaged.

Degenerative Changes (Chronic Stage)

If the condition continues without proper management, wear and tear inside the joint can occur. This may lead to arthritis-like changes, ongoing pain, and limited jaw movement.

The “Critical Zone”

The circled red area on the diagram shows the critical zone — the point where symptoms become more severe and lasting joint changes begin. TMJ treatment is more effective if it is started before the critical zone.


Degenerative
Changes
Catching
Muscular
Symptoms
Locking
Increase
Clicking
The Critical zone
Time



Chapter Five

Treatment pathways at TMJ Clinics

TMJ Clinics offers comprehensive, multidisciplinary care for patients with TMD. Your care plan involves input from several different professionals skilled in TMJ management and you're able to access a wide range of treatments under one roof.

5.1 TMJ Clinics' multidisciplinary approach

We believe TMJ requires a multidisciplinary approach with input from dentists, physiotherapists, doctors and other healthcare providers. At TMJ Clinics, these professionals work together to ensure you receive evidence-based care for your symptoms.

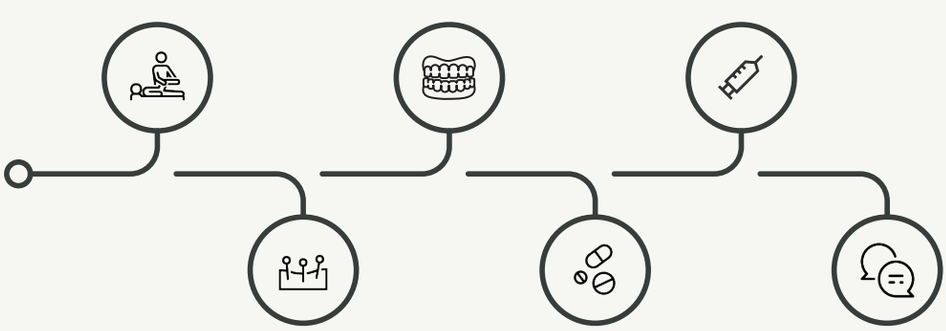
5.2 Treatment modalities at TMJ Clinics

The cornerstone of TMJ Clinics care is multidisciplinary consultation. When designing patient care plans, we involve our dentists, physiotherapists, maxillofacial surgeons, and splint engineers. We then coordinate the delivery of multi-modal treatments, which allows TMJ Clinics patients to access all types of care through one clinical portal.

Physiotherapy: Exercises and manual techniques to improve jaw function and reduce pain.

Splints: Custom-designed dental splints to protect your jaw and reduce pain.

Injections: Used to reduce muscle tension from bruxism.



Dry needling: To alleviate muscle spasms and promote healing.

Medication: Anti-inflammatory and pain medications to manage symptoms.

Psychology: Stress management and behavioural therapy to address underlying triggers.

Conclusion

Your next steps towards managing TMJ symptoms

Implementing the self-care strategies outlined in this booklet may help you ease some of your TMD symptoms.

However, if your symptoms persist or worsen, it's important to access professional support through TMJ Clinics.

Book an appointment

Disclaimer: All information is general and not intended as a substitute for professional advice. Any surgical or invasive procedure carries risks.