Dental Health
What your Dentist Wishes You Knew

What are You Doing for Your Teeth?
Gum Disease and Treatment
Health Threats your Dentist can Detect

Scan to read H&W digital
Take a Bite Out of Jaw Pain

By Fiona Young-Brown

Patient 1’s lower jaw does not pair up properly with her upper jaw. In the winter, extreme cold temperatures cause pain and stiffness in the joint.

Patient 2’s jaw clicks whenever he yawns and sometimes when he chews. Most of the time, it doesn’t bother him, but occasionally it can be quite painful.

Patient 3 suffers from recurring headaches as a result of tension and pain in her face.

All three of these people are suffering from temporomandibular joint disorders (TMJ) and while you may think that the name is a mouthful, the symptoms and resultant pain can be very uncomfortable to live with.

The temporomandibular joint is where the lower jaw (mandible) connects with the temporal bone on the side of the head. More simply, it is where our jaws meet. Unlike many joints in our body which operate in only one direction — for example the knee, which is a hinge-type joint — the temporomandibular joint operates as both a hinge and a sliding joint. It is this combination of movement that allows us to yawn, talk, and chew.

TMJ disorders can arise from a number of problems. Some causes include:
- Injury to the jaw or neck
- Repeated grinding or clenching of the teeth and jaw, perhaps linked to stress or even something as simple as regular gum chewing
- Osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis
- Dislocation of the joint

Sometimes TMJ disorders lead to a popping or clicking of the joint; more serious cases can cause limited motion within the jaw pain upon motion, headaches, and neck pain.

An estimated 10 million Americans suffer from TMJ pain at some point, although some estimate the actual number to be much higher. The condition seems to affect women more than men, particularly women in their 30s and 40s.

If you think you might have TMJ disorder and are suffering from related pain and/or difficulties with jaw movement, you should first see your dentist or doctor to rule out other possible causes, such as sinus infection or an abscess. Once alternatives have been ruled out, you can work to find options that may ease your pain.

Mild cases of TMJ pain, for example, those that are seasonal or which occur only a few times a year, can typically be treated by avoiding certain foods, applying ice or heat packs as needed, and taking an over-the-counter analgesic, if required. You may discover that eating certain foods exacerbates the situation; if so, these should be avoided when the problem flares up. For serious cases caused by grinding or clenching of the jaw, a dentist may recommend a bite guard to help relax the muscles while sleeping. Relaxation and gentle stretching exercises are one of the most popular ways to both ease TMJ pain and to ease stress which may make the pain worse.

Surgery or orthodontic devices designed to change the bite should only be used in very limited circum-

For more information about temporomandibular joint disorders, visit the TMJ Association at http://www.tmj.org.