

What is dental occlusion?

Dental occlusion is just another name for the way your teeth meet then your jaws bite together.

What is TMJ?

The letters TMJ are short for 'temporo-mandibular joint' which is the joint connecting your lower jaw and your skull. The movement in this joint lets you open and close your mouth and chew from side to side.

What kind of problems might I have?

If your teeth don't fit together properly, you can have problems not only in your teeth themselves, but also the gums, the temporo-mandibular joint or the muscles that move your jaw. These problems are called 'occlusal' problems.

- Gums - Loose teeth or receding gums can be made worse by an incorrect bite.
- TMJ - Clicking, grinding or pain in your jaw joints, ringing or buzzing in your ears and difficulty in opening or closing your mouth could all be due to your teeth not meeting each other properly.
- Muscles - If your jaw is in the wrong position, the muscles that move the jaw have to work a lot harder and can get tired. This leads to muscle spasm. The main symptoms are continual headaches or migraine, especially first thing in the morning; pain behind your eyes; sinus pain and pains in your neck and shoulders. Sometimes even back muscles may be involved.

How can I tell if I have a problem?

Many people have imperfect occlusion and missing teeth, but seem to adjust and avoid symptoms. Occasionally, in times of increased stress and tension, however symptoms may appear and then go away immediately. Or, your teeth and gums may be affected straight away and instead of headaches, you may suffer from:

- Flattened, worn teeth
- Broken teeth, fillings and crowns
- Loose teeth
- Continual sensitivity of your teeth to temperature change
- Toothache with no apparent cause

If you think you have any of these problems, ask your dentist.

You may find that you clench or grind your teeth, although most people who do this aren't aware of it. Sometimes it can be caused by anxiety, but generally most people clench their teeth when they are concentrating on a task - housework, gardening, car mechanics, typing and so on.

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What happens after the veneer is fitted?

You may wake up in the morning with a stiff jaw or tenderness when you bite together. This could be due to clenching or grinding your teeth in your sleep. Most people who grind their teeth do it while they are asleep and may not know they are doing it.

If you suffer from severe headaches or from neck and shoulder pain, you may not have linked this with possible jaw problems. Or you may keep having pain or discomfort on the side of your face around your ears or jaw joints or difficulty in moving your jaw. These are all symptoms of having problems with your TMJ.

If you are missing some teeth at the back of your mouth, this may lead to an unbalanced bite, which can cause uneven pressure on your teeth.

Together, all these symptoms are called TMJ syndrome.

How can occlusal problems be treated?

See your dentist. He or she may be able to help you or may refer you to a specialist who deals with occlusal problems.

Depending on the problems you are having, it can be possible to spot the signs of an occlusal problem. Various muscles may be sore when tested, or the broken and worn areas of your teeth will show you are grinding your teeth – a common sign of an incorrect bite.

If your dentist suspects that your problems are due to an incorrect bite, he or she may help to improve the problem by supplying a temporary soft night guard or hard plastic appliance that fits over your upper or lower teeth. This appliance needs to be measured and fitted very accurately so that when you bite on it; all your teeth meet at exactly the same time in a position where your muscles are relaxed. You may have to wear this all the time, or just at night. If the appliance relieves your symptoms then your bite may need to be corrected permanently.

Tooth Adjustment (Equilibration) -Your teeth may need to be carefully adjusted to meet evenly. Changing the direction and position of the slopes that guide your teeth together can often help to reposition the jaw.

Replacement of teeth - The temporo-mandibular joint needs equal support from both sides of both jaws. The chewing action is designed to work properly only when all your teeth are present and in the correct position. Missing teeth may need to be replaced either with a partial denture or bridgework.

Replacement is not usually done until a diagnosis has been confirmed by using an appliance and this has fully relieved the symptoms. Relief in some patients is instant. In others it can take a long time.

Medication - Some drugs can help in certain cases, but this is usually only temporary. Hormone replacement therapy may also help some women.

Diet and exercise - As with any joint pain, it can help to put less stress on the joint. A soft diet may be helpful, as can corrective exercises and external heat. Physiotherapy exercises can often help and your dentist may be able to show some of these to you.

Relaxation - Counselling and relaxation therapy can help in some cases. These techniques can help the patient to become more aware of stressful situations and learn to control tension.

Will straightening my teeth help?

If your teeth are too far out of line or in a totally incorrect bite position, it may be necessary to fit an orthodontic appliance to move them into a better position. For more information, please see our leaflet 'Tell me about orthodontics (Braces)'.

How many people suffer from these problems?

Up to 1 in 4 people may have some symptoms. Both men and women are affected equally, although women tend to seek treatment more often than men. The symptoms can often start with the menopause or other hormonal changes.