

# Dental Healthwatch

## Renowned Dentist Relieves Patients from Head & Neck Pain

Whether it's a high school athlete, a grandmother with poorly-fitted dentures, a survivor of an automobile accident, or a young girl cutting her second teeth, millions of Americans share a painful condition: recurring discomfort or pain arising from a dysfunction in their Temporomandibular Joint, or TMJ, which connects the lower jaw to the skull. TMJ could also contribute to neck and shoulder pain or chronic headaches.

Such chronic facial pain can have serious consequences, ranging from insomnia to severe digestion difficulties, even fibromyalgia (widespread joint and muscle pain). TMJ dysfunction has become a special focus of a small group of dentists who are studying and developing treatment programs for sufferers.

Dr. Louis R. Vita of Clifton, NJ, has become a recognized authority of TMJ problems in the Northeast, who has patients referred by medical practitioners, chiropractors and other dentists. He regularly participates in professional seminars and programs to study and share knowledge and techniques with other practitioners in the field of TMJ-related problems, including the Dawson Center for Advanced Dental Studies in St. Petersburg, FL, and the Facial Pain Center at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

In addition, he presents information before professional healthcare study groups to help their members recognize TMJ-rooted difficulties.

"TMJ problems are debilitating and often patients are convinced that they must just live with their pain," he said. "Some patients are literally in agony and pain arising from a variety of causes including trauma from falls, accidents or sports activities, while others may suffer with lower intensity, but constant pain." And, many of these patients have been told that the

level of pain relief they had received was the best available, even though they had continued to suffer on a daily basis.

Other problems, he noted, include loss of teeth that may unbalance biting, infections, and bruxism (the involuntary grinding of teeth during sleep). "Because the causes of facial pain are so varied, often the TMJ connection is not recognized by the primary caregiver, whether a dentist or physician. Treatment may just be directed to relieve pain without addressing the underlying conditions which can lead to more serious consequences over time," Dr. Vita stresses.

He points out that when the TMJ is injured or strained, certain changes are noticed even though there may be no obvious pain. These changes or signs often include a deviation in posture, such as slouching or tilting the head forward or to one side.

There may also be popping or cracking noises from joints when patients eat or open their mouths. Sufferers may even notice that they cannot open their mouths as fully as they once could.

While changes in the contours of one's face are common with age, people may notice swollen cheek muscles or their chin is off center. Teeth may loosen, wear out, break, or shift and develop spaces, thus causing extensive treatment or premature tooth loss.

Patients may feel other discomforts arising from TMJ changes. Often they will have headaches located at the temples, top of the head, or back of the head. There could also be pain, clogging or ringing in your ears, as well as pain in the area in front of



Dr. Louis R. Vita

the ears. Another common complaint is pain in the back or neck, which causes discomfort when sitting or trying to sleep.

Dr. Vita notes that patients require a full examination, including a careful analysis of other health-related issues, as well as x-rays or MRIs, to determine if the patient is truly suffering from TMJ-related pain. "We must be detailed in our investigation in order to develop an appropriate, specific diagnosis. As such, we work very closely with referring dentists, medical doctors and chiropractors to find out what is causing the patient's pain and then develop subsequent treatment," he stated.

In many cases, he says, fitting a patient with the most appropriate bite plate that is either worn all the time or just while sleeping provides the patient with pain relief and helps in the healing process. "There are various mouthpieces available off the retail shelf which can provide relief for pain on a short-term basis, but they don't truly address the cause of the condition and may actually worsen the problem," he noted. "We specially design bite guards for our patients that do more than provide temporary relief. However, they are only part of the initial therapy dealing with just one element of the overall problem."

Another area that can be beneficial to TMJ-disorder sufferers is physical therapy. "Here again, the problem may be related to an injury or some other external cause. The assistance of a physical therapist trained in TMJ problems is invaluable," said Dr. Vita, who recently added a physical therapist qualified in TMJ-related techniques to his practice. He adds that once the TMJ-related problem is recognized, he often assists physicians, chiropractors,



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Facial Pain Issues

physical therapists and other dentists, who do not have expertise with TMJ issues, in treating their patients.

Quite often, medications are used to relieve muscle spasms, reduce inflammation and help the patient get proper sleep. Once stabilized, it is common and often necessary for some form of treatment to be applied to the teeth. This could be simply "balancing the bite" or even restorative actions such as adding crowns (caps) or replacing missing teeth. These would assist in maintaining balance and harmony between the TMJ and muscles, stabilizing and freeing the patient of pain for many years.

Surgical correction should be considered only when the soft tissue injury is identified or diagnosed early, before it irreversibly changes position. If the structures are healthy but simply displaced, then repair could be considered. This, however, occurs with only a very small percentage of patients, Dr. Vita observed. The risks and benefits should be carefully weighed before taking the surgery option.

Sometimes facial pain is not related to TMJ problems, but may be symptomatic of other conditions, sometimes very serious ones. "I've had patients whose pain was caused by coronary conditions and tumors," he noted.

There are many conditions that mimic the common causes of facial, head and

neck pain. Clinicians need to effectively rule out other possible causes, such as:

- Neuralgia and neurological disease
- Cardiac conditions
- Endocrine diseases, such as diabetes and thyroid diseases
- Ear and sinus infections

- Medications to combat cholesterol, blood pressure, hormone replacement, antidepressants, mood elevators and others

Dr. Vita said emphatically that, "It is imperative for patients to see their dentist or doctor as early as possible when symptoms appear. In fact, with regular exams, problems may be discovered and dealt with before symptoms do appear.



The faster the clinician can determine the cause of the problem and commence treatment, the greater the likelihood of success. This could actually be a life-saving event."

For additional information about TMJ-related disorders, contact Dr. Vita at **973-777-1933**.



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TMJ - Facial Pain

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