

Your Journey with Temporomandibular Joint Dysfunction



For more information scan this QR code or go to myhealth.alberta.ca/tmj-dysfunction-pathway

Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) dysfunction is the name given to various conditions that can cause pain, clicking or movement problems around your jaw and the muscles surrounding it.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you know what to expect and how to prepare as you and your healthcare team work together to manage and treat your TMJ dysfunction. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your healthcare team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your journey.

Before your appointment ([page 5](#))

- Write down how you feel, your symptoms, and any questions or concerns.
- Symptoms may include pain or tenderness of your jaw, ear pain, headaches, joint sounds, trouble with fully opening your mouth, and jaw locking.



Visit your healthcare provider ([page 6](#))

- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.
- Share all of your symptoms and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.
- In order to better manage your health condition, your healthcare provider needs to hear from you and understand who you are and what matters to you.



Get your assessment & tests ([page 7](#))

- Your healthcare provider may measure how much you can open your mouth, check how you bite, and will feel your jaw and face.
- In most cases, you will not need additional tests unless you are being referred to a specialist.



Review your assessment & test results ([page 8](#))

- Find your test results on MyHealth Records or MyAHS Connect (myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords).
- Talk with your healthcare provider so you know what your test results mean.



Review your treatment & management options ([page 9](#))

- There are many ways to treat and manage TMJ dysfunction. Talk with your healthcare team to determine what is best for you, such as:
 - **Jaw rest**
 - No chewing gum
 - Have a soft or altered diet
 - **Stress reduction**
 - Hot/cold therapy
 - Self-massage
 - **Dental appliance or night guard**
 - See a dentist for a proper assessment and fitting
 - **Medicine**
 - **Physiotherapy**
 - **Massage therapy**



Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral ([page 12](#))

- Not all patients need a referral to see a specialist.
- A referral is determined based on your symptoms and history. In most cases, you will need to try some of the management options for at least 3 months before being referred to a specialist.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms ([page 13](#))

- **Call 811 or go to an emergency room** if your jaw is locked open or shut.



Keep taking care of yourself ([page 14](#))

- Take an active role in your treatment.
- Write down any new symptoms.
- Look for other healthy lifestyle resources and supports.



Whole-person health ([page 2](#))

Important Tips:

Need a family doctor?

ahs.ca/findadoctor

Need a translator?

Let your healthcare provider know

Need health advice?

Call Health Link at 811

Need to find programs and services in your community?

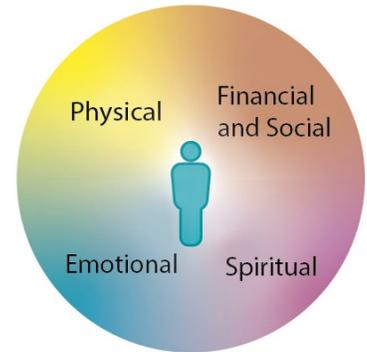
Call 211 or visit ab.211.ca

Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the medicine wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical:** your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social:** your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual:** your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional:** how you think, feel, and cope with life events



Whole-person health

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

“What are the things in my life that are important to me?”

“What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?”



Continued on next page.

Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:



Physical

“My symptoms are making it hard for me to do my job.”

“Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to move around, it’s hard to take care of myself.”

Financial and Social

“I’m worried I won’t be able to get to all of my appointments.”

“I need my daughter with me as a translator.”

“I’m not sure how I will pay for my medications this month.”

Emotional

“I’m lonely and have no one to talk to.”

“I have a lot of stress and I’m not sure how to manage it.”

“Ever since my friend died, I’ve been struggling with my feelings.”

Spiritual

“It’s important that I follow traditional healing practices.”

“How can I include my culture’s foods and family recipes in my nutrition plan?”

“It’s important that my religious practice of fasting is respected and brought into my care.”

What is temporomandibular joint (TMJ) dysfunction?

The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) is located in front of each ear where the lower jawbone (mandible) meets the skull (temporal bone). Your temporomandibular joint (TMJ) acts like a sliding hinge, connecting your jawbone to your skull. You have one joint on each side of your face. A small disc (articular disc shown in Figure 1 below) made of cartilage separates and cushions the bones when the jaw opens and closes.

Temporomandibular (TM) joint

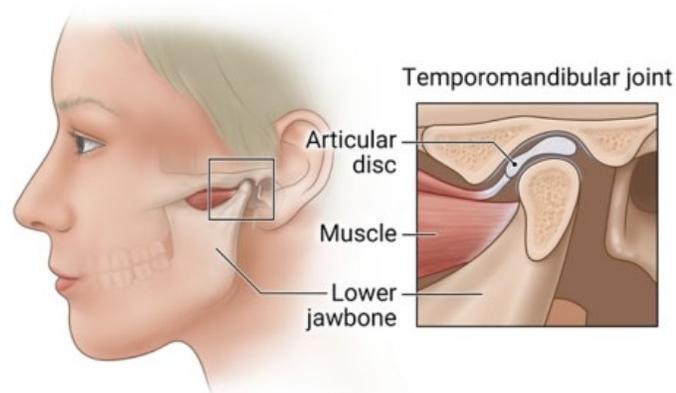


Figure 1

What causes TMJ dysfunction?

The exact cause of a person's TMJ dysfunction can be hard to determine. TMJ dysfunction can be a result of many different things or a combination of things.

Common TMJ dysfunction causes may include:

- Injury to your jaw
- Inflammation or swelling in your jaw joint (arthritis)
- Teeth grinding or clenching (bruxism)
- When your teeth don't fit together exactly as they should ([malocclusion](#))
- Stress

Common symptoms you may have with TMJ dysfunction are:

- Pain in your jaw, ear, shoulder or neck
- Stiffness in your jaw
- Jaw popping or painful clicking
- Difficulty opening or closing your mouth
- Headaches
- Earaches
- Toothache
- A change in the way your teeth fit together (malocclusion)

Before your appointment

Everyone will have their own unique journey with TMJ dysfunction. How you move through your journey, the number of visits with your healthcare team, the steps you will take, and the order you take them in will depend on your individual needs and will be decided in partnership with your healthcare team. Always follow the specific recommendations from your healthcare team.

Here are a few tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- Use a symptom tracker to write down important information to share with your healthcare team about your symptoms.
- A symptom tracker can help you remember what symptom(s) you're feeling, when it started, how often it happens, and what makes it better or worse.
- If you are having any other symptoms around your jaw, please let your healthcare provider know. Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.



Helpful tools and resources

Use a symptom tracker (HQCA):

hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf

To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or see the Alberta Health Services **My Care Conversations app** (ahs.ca/careapp) website for more information about recording your conversation with your healthcare provider.



Visit your healthcare provider

Your healthcare provider will review your history and symptoms. They may ask you the following questions:

- Has your bite (ability to open and close your mouth) changed at all?
- Do you have any history of hurting or injuring your head, neck or jaw?
- Do you have a sore tooth?
- What is your current level of stress and life satisfaction?

Having a completed symptom tracker will be helpful to answer these questions.

What should I share with my healthcare provider?

- What impact the TMJ dysfunction is having on things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships.
- What daily activities your TMJ dysfunction is interfering with, such as eating, drinking, talking.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team. If you don't understand what your healthcare team is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

“This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?”

“It sounded like you said that I should... Did I understand that correctly?”

“Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?”



Helpful tools and resources

- Making the most of your appointment: myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888
- Working with your healthcare team: hqca.ca/for-patients-and-families/working-with-your-healthcare-team

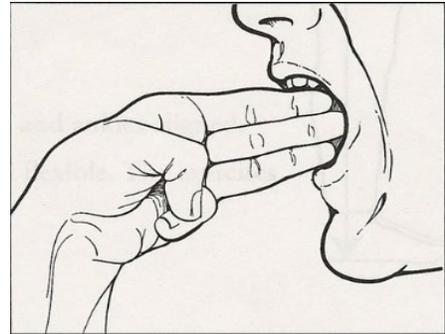


Get your assessment & tests

Your healthcare provider will need to press and feel your face, jaw, and around your ears.

They will need to look in your mouth and at your teeth.

Your healthcare provider will need to measure how much your mouth opens. They may do this by measuring with their gloved fingers. Normal mouth opening in adults is approximately 30 millimeters or 3 finger widths. If your mouth opens less than 2 finger widths it may mean you have TMJ dysfunction.



sideeffectssupport.com/blogs/survivor-caregiver/understanding-trismus

Your healthcare provider may also ask you to bite on a tongue depressor to determine the type of pain you are having.



In most cases, you will not need further tests unless you are needing to see a specialist.

Depending on your history and symptoms your healthcare provider may need to take a closer look at your jaw joints and the structures around them if they are going to be sending you to see a specialist. You may be asked to have one of the following:

MRI

- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) is a test that uses a magnetic field and pulses of radio wave energy to make pictures of the organs and structures inside the body.
- Booking an MRI is needed for a referral to a specialist (Oral and maxillofacial surgeon).

CT Scan

- If you have a lump or mass your healthcare provider may order a computed tomography (CT) scan which uses X-rays to make detailed pictures of structures inside of the body. There are different types of CT scans that might be available depending on your condition, such a cone beam CT (CBCT) scan and your healthcare provider can discuss the best options for your care.



Review your assessment & test results

It is important to know what your assessment and test results are and what they mean for you personally. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider. Medical terminology can be hard to understand. And even common words like “positive” or “negative” might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

You might ask:

“What does this mean for me?”

“Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?”



Helpful tools and resources

See your results and health information using secure online tools:

MyHealth Records

See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Records account. Sign up at myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords.

MyAHS Connect

See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to access your MyAHS Connect account. Learn more at ahs.ca/myahsconnect.



Review your treatment & management options

Every individual will require their own specific treatment and management plan. Always follow the specific recommendations from your healthcare team.

Jaw rest

It is important to understand that having increased muscle activity can increase your pain and symptoms with TMJ dysfunction. It can be helpful to learn ways to rest your jaw muscles and relax your body.

- Learn to recognize when you are clenching your teeth.
 - It can be difficult to stop clenching your jaw, especially when it has become a habit over time.
 - Practice keeping your teeth apart, bringing them together only when swallowing or eating.
 - Try setting reminders throughout the day to check if you are clenching your teeth and to relax your jaw.
- Do not overuse and stress your jaw muscles.
 - Avoid chewing gum or any other chewy snacks, biting your nails, or resting your chin on your hand.
- To help rest your jaw, you may consider making changes to your diet and how you are eating.
 - Choose softer foods that are easy to chew like eggs, yogurt, or soup. Avoid hard foods that cause your jaws to work very hard. Try cutting your food into small pieces. And if your jaw gets too painful to chew, or if it locks, you may need to puree your food for a while. Speak to your healthcare provider if you need support.
- Applying heat, such as a warm cloth or heat pack, for 20 minutes at a time can help relax the muscles and improve your pain. This can be done a few times a day. Additionally, some find that ice or cold packs can be helpful to reduce swelling and reduce pain. Like heat, this can be done a few times a day for up to 20 minutes at a time.
- Gentle self- massage can ease the pain and decrease the tension in your jaw. Your healthcare provider can show you how to do this if they feel it will help you.

Stress reduction

- If you are feeling stressed or have things in your life causing more stress than normal, you may notice increased muscle activity in your jaw. If you work on things that lower your stress, you may be able to stop clenching or grinding your teeth. This may help relax your jaw and reduce your pain.
- Learning to manage your stress and trying different relaxation techniques can be helpful. Here is some more information for relaxing your mind and body: [Stress Management: Relaxing Your Mind and Body \(myhealth.alberta.ca\)](#)
- If you are finding your stress levels are too high, or struggling to cope on your own, a referral to a mental health specialist, such as psychologist may be an option for further support. Find more mental health supports and resources at [Help in Tough Times](#).

Dental appliance

- Dental appliances, sometimes called night guards, can reduce pain and help improve your mouth opening.
- It is important to see a dentist for a proper assessment and fitting for a dental appliance. Over-the-counter dental appliances / mouth guards are often designed for sport activities and are not recommended for TMJ dysfunction.

Medicine

- Your healthcare provider may recommend over-the-counter medicine to relieve your pain, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin).
- Depending on your pain level and symptoms, your healthcare provider may also recommend other medicines such as muscle relaxants. These may cause drowsiness and are recommended to take at bedtime. Always read the information that came with your medicine. If you have any questions or concerns, talk to your pharmacist or healthcare provider.
- Botulinum toxin (known to many as Botox) injections are shots that use a toxin to prevent a muscle from moving for a limited time and can provide some relief of TMJ dysfunction symptoms. **It is important to make sure the person giving you the Botox injection is certified and has experience.** Many different healthcare providers in Alberta can offer Botox injections including but not limited to dentists, neurologists, pain specialists, headache specialists, anesthesiologists, family physicians, and certified nurses. Some of the services may be covered by Alberta Health while others will have a cost.

Physiotherapy

- If you decide to look for a physiotherapist, check that the provider has the skill set for treating TMJ dysfunction, as not all physiotherapist's have that experience.
- Currently in Alberta, patients can self-refer to physiotherapy for TMJ management, but treatment may not be covered under Alberta Health Insurance Plan and may be at a cost to the patient.
- You may also consider calling the Rehab Advice Line (1-833-379-0563 or 811), which is a telephone service providing guidance and general health information for Albertans by physiotherapists. This is a free service and you do not need a referral to call.

Massage therapy

- There can be a reduction in frequency and intensity of TMJ symptoms with the application of massage therapy, but treatment is not covered under Alberta Health and may be at a cost.

Surgery

- Most people do not need surgery. It may be done when other treatments don't work. It is important that other treatment options are tried properly for at least 3 months before exploring surgery.

Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different treatment and management options and decide which one(s) will work best for you:

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of each treatment or management option?”

“Can I use any of these options together?”

“How will this treatment make me feel? Will it have side effects?”

“What results can I expect?”





Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

- Not all patients with TMJ dysfunction need a referral. Depending on your history, symptoms, and what treatments you have tried you may need a referral to a Oral Maxillofacial (OMF) surgeon.
- An OMF surgeon is a medical specialist who focuses on helping patients with diseases, injuries, abnormalities and cancers of the mouth, jaw, and face.
- You should hear about the progress of the referral to your OMF surgeon within 3 months.
- Your OMF surgeon will assess you and your condition and recommend what treatment is best for you and your needs.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms

As you try the treatment options you chose, remember that if something doesn't work the way you thought it would, think about other options and connect with your healthcare provider to find a treatment that will work for you.

Remember: If your jaw is locked open or shut or it is hard to move your jaw, call your healthcare provider, or go to an Emergency Room.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your healthcare provider if:

- Your jaw pain gets worse
- Your face is swollen
- You do not get better as expected

Watching your symptoms is important. Call your healthcare provider or Health Link at 811 if you have any concerns. You might feel like you don't want to bother your healthcare team, but no detail is too small to share. If it matters to you, it will matter to your healthcare team.



Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.



There are many different things that can impact your health and wellness. It is important to be able to work with your healthcare team to decide what is best for you, in your life, given your own unique circumstances as you manage TMJ dysfunction.

Remember, you don't need to do everything all at once. Take realistic and manageable steps in your health and wellness. Consider why making a change may benefit you and the things that matter to you.



Helpful tools and resources

Find resources and services in your community:

211 helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available anytime, day or night, by phone, text, and online chat. It is confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone.

To contact 211:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Visit ab.211.ca

Workshops, classes, and services from the Alberta Healthy Living Program can help you to improve your health and quality of life with a chronic condition: ahs.ca/ahlp

Chronic Disease Management support: ahs.ca/cdm

Health Information & Tools: myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/HealthInfoToolsDefault.aspx

Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

- Temporomandibular Disorders (MyHealth Alberta): myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=hw209469
- Temporomandibular (Jaw) Disorders: patient.info/bones-joints-muscles/temporomandibular-joint-disorders
- The Rehabilitation Advice Line (1-833-379-0563 or 811) - This is a telephone service open Monday to Friday to all Albertans, providing rehabilitation advice and general health information for Albertans of any age.

Get help now:

- Emergency: Call 911
- Health Link: Call 811

Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- [Addiction Helpline](https://www.addictionhelpline.ca/): 1-866-332-2322
- [Mental Health Helpline](https://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/): 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Crisis Services Canada: 988, or visit talksuicide.ca

Helpful tip

If you can't print this resource at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider to print it for you. You can also use a computer and printer at your local library.

Community and social supports:

- Alberta 211: 211, or visit ab.211.ca
- Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818, or visit alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports.aspx
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or visit alberta.ca/income-support.aspx

Alberta Health Services programs:

- Home Care: ahs.ca/homecare
- Find a Dietitian: ahs.ca/nutrition
- Spiritual Care Services: ahs.ca/spiritualcare

Primary care (family doctors):

- Find a doctor: ahs.ca/findadoctor
- Virtual care guide: ahs.ca/virtualhealth

Patient concerns and feedback:

- Office of Alberta Health Advocates: alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates.aspx
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or visit ahs.ca/patientfeedback

Important phone numbers

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Notes

Use this space to take notes.

About this Pathway

The AHS Provincial Pathways Unit co- developed this patient pathway in partnership with patient and family advisors, primary and specialty care providers in Alberta. It is current as of **July 2024**.

Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by a multi-disciplinary co-design team including Oral and Maxillofacial surgeons and primary care providers from across Alberta.

Pathway Review Process

Primary care pathways undergo scheduled review every two years, or earlier if there is a clinically significant change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled review is July 2026. However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please send your [feedback here](#), or email us at albertapathways@ahs.ca.

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Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified healthcare professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated healthcare providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice or professional competence.