

I am lucky to be able to say that my experience with TMJ and treatment was actually rather painless. My symptoms began to crop up about three or four years ago (when I was about seventeen or eighteen) and started off very minor. I didn't even realize there was a problem until much later. I began to notice that it was difficult and painful, especially on the right side of my jaw, to keep my mouth open during semi-annual cleanings and dental checkups. It carried on like that for perhaps a year, and then I slowly started to get occasional popping noises from my right jaw joint when I would open my mouth past a certain point. It wasn't painful, and my other joints (knuckles, et cetera) had a tendency to pop or crack as well, so I didn't think anything of it.

As the problem slowly worsened and the pops got louder and more frequent, I began to do some research. In doing so I quickly found that TMJ is the root cause of many a medical horror story. Advanced cases can cause debilitating migraine headaches, severe pain in the joint, and even dislocation where the jaw falls out of its socket and has to be physically jarred back into place, just like happens with a dislocated shoulder. Of course, I didn't want any of this to happen to me, so I was sure to ask about it at my next dental checkup.

At this point, I was a patient of a different dental office, and after showing the problem to the doctors, I was told that, unless it was already causing me other symptoms (like the scary ones I didn't want to experience), there wasn't much that could be done to control my TMJ. So I simply did my best to ignore it even as the popping got louder and louder and began to happen nearly every time I opened my mouth.

About a year later, my family switched over to Healthy Smile Center's plan and I went in for my initial visit. At this point the jaw noise was so loud that the dental assistant actually jumped the first time it happened even though I had warned her about it beforehand. After being told for the longest time that nothing could be done about it, I thought of the TMJ as a minor quirk that I could use as an ice breaker at parties or something. But the people at Healthy Smile seemed to know better, as they immediately called in Dr. Debra who, as it turns out, has extensive training in this sort of thing, to have a look. Apparently I was a textbook case for her and she knew exactly what to do. They took some measurements, photos, and x-rays of my jaw and neck, and tested my nerve function with my jaw in and out of place. After that, they took some molds and fitted me for two different appliances that would hold my jaw in a different position and train my joints to function like they should.

They resemble mouth guards or retainers; one for the day and one for the night. It took a few days to get them properly adjusted and to get used to wearing them, but now I don't even notice when they're in. Best of all, the results were instant. Because of how the appliances fit, my jaw isn't able to reach the point where it would pop. I literally haven't heard or felt the joint act up since the day I put the appliances in. Even when I take them out for a few minutes to brush, floss, and clean the appliances, I'm unable to pop my jaw.

Now, about three months after starting this whole process, I'm about to begin weaning myself off the daytime appliance, and hopefully I'll be done wearing it completely in another few weeks or months. Given what I've read and heard about TMJ, I'm beyond relieved Dr. Debra was able to catch this in time and prevent any of the serious problems from developing. If anyone is reading this while considering treatment, all I can suggest is to do everything you can to get it looked at and follow the treatment plan to the letter. It absolutely worked for me.

-Chris Valentic