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Taking a Bite out of Headaches

Is your migraine related to your bite?

By Kelly James-Enger
Special to MSN

As researchers learn more about migraines, they're discovering a number of things can trigger them — including certain foods, stress, and even poor posture. If you suffer from migraines, you may also consider whether they are triggered by a problem with your jaw.

You've probably heard of TMJ, but you may not know what it is. TMJ refers to the temporomandibular joint, the hinge joint on the sides of your head where your lower jaw meets the temporal bone of your skull. A TMJ disorder originates from this spot and can trigger

headaches and migraines. If you are a migraine sufferer who also experiences pain in your jaw or around your ears, you may have a TMJ problem that's aggravating your migraine. Often people don't associate headaches with dental problems and look for other causes, says dentist Peter DeRose, who practices in Chicago. "But a problem with the TMJ — or the muscles or neuromuscular system in this area — can trigger headaches and migraines."

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The Link

Many people with TMJ problems clench or grind their teeth at night, and awaken with a sore jaw — and possibly a migraine. The reason appears to be that the trigeminal nerve that transmits signals from the face to the brain is linked with the part of the brain that is involved in migraine pain. Fred Frietag, associate director of the Diamond Headache Clinic in Chicago,

notes that "if you have a TMJ problem and you treat the bite problem, you may see a modification in the frequency of your headaches," he says. But because people often tend to lump different kinds of headaches

together, it's difficult to determine why the headache is improving. It may be due to treating the TMJ problem or to other factors such as the placebo effect of seeing a doctor, says Graff-Radford.

It is clear that a TMJ disorder that causes inflammation in the jaw joint can serve as a trigger for migraine sufferers. Yet an abnormality in your bite alone may not cause mig

population studies, there are millions of people who have abnormalities in their bites and headaches," says Graff-Radford. "So therefore there is not enough evidence to suggest the bite will directly affect the migraine headache."

Diagnosing the problem

If you suspect you have a TMJ problem that may be linked to your migraines, your dentist will examine your bite for signs like tooth wear or chipping, says DeRose. You may also have a lump in your jaw, near your ears, or that radiates up the side of your head.

Even if you don't have these symptoms, your doctor should rule out a potential TMJ trigger if you have migraines, the doctor should examine the jaw joint," says Graff-Radford. "If there is a jaw joint finding it should be addressed to reduce the frequency of headaches." To diagnose a TMJ disorder, a person must meet three out of four criteria — limited range of motion, pain in the jaw joint is examined, joint noise like popping or cracking, and functional pain, or pain while chewing. Some people with TMJ find that wearing a device called an "anterior deprogrammer" or "anterior deprogrammer" mouth guard that keeps the back teeth separated, reduces night grinding and clenching, and lessens jaw soreness.

Check it out

Don't rule out a TMJ or dental problem as a source or trigger of your migraines, says DeRose. "If you do have one, addressing it may in fact reduce the number of migraines you have. "Anytime you have a headache — whether it's migraine or other forms of headache — you can aggravate that headache with what we call afferent [nerve] stimulation, whether it's coming from the neck or the jaw joint or the sinuses or any other structure," says Graff-Radford. "There is no evidence to see an abnormality in those areas, treatment of those areas can reduce the frequency of headaches."

Yet he adds that it's important that your doctor determine what type of head pain you're experiencing in addition to diagnosing a TMJ problem to properly treat you. "You don't treat the headache by addressing the jaw," says Graff-Radford. "If it's migraine, you also use acute migraine therapy."

Kelly James-Enger is a writer specializing in health, fitness and nutrition, and co-author of "Changes, Big Results" (Clarkson Potter/Random House, February, 2005) and other books. She is also the founder of [BodyWise Consulting](#), which shares practical, real-life fitness, nutrition and wellness information with a variety of audiences.