

Physical Therapists Highlight Often-Overlooked Muscular Causes of TMJ Pain

Experts explain how jaw, neck, and upper-back muscles may contribute to temporomandibular disorder symptoms and how physical therapy can address them.

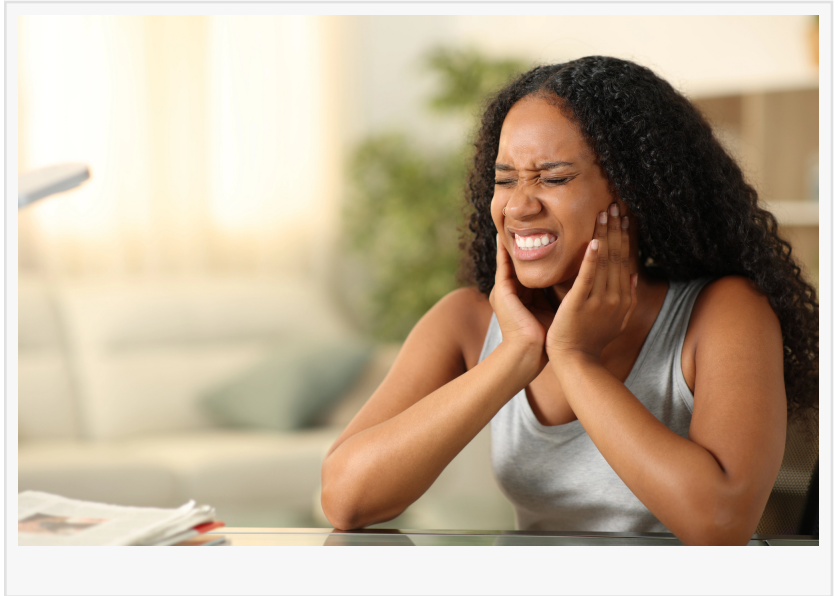
WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, August 18, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- People experiencing jaw pain, clicking, headaches, or difficulty opening their mouths may assume the problem begins and ends with the temporomandibular joint. However, physical therapists say the muscles surrounding the jaw, and those extending into the neck and upper back, can also play an important role in how TMJ symptoms develop and persist.

[Capitol Physical Therapy](#) recently explored the muscular factors behind temporomandibular joint pain in its educational article, "[The Muscles Behind Your TMJ Pain, and How Physical Therapy Can Help](#)". The article examines the major muscles involved in jaw movement, how muscle overload may contribute to symptoms, the relationship between posture and TMJ discomfort, and the ways physical therapy can address contributing movement patterns.



"TMJ pain isn't always just about the joint," said Dr. Subha Nagasubramanian, physical therapist and owner of Capitol Physical Therapy. "When the muscles controlling the jaw become tight or overloaded, or when the neck and upper back are contributing to tension, those factors can affect how comfortably the jaw moves."

TMJ Pain Can Involve More Than the Jaw Joint



The temporomandibular joint functions as a sliding hinge connecting the jawbone to the skull. Several pairs of muscles control jaw movement, including the masseter, temporalis, medial pterygoid, and lateral pterygoid muscles.

The masseter, one of the body's major chewing muscles, contracts when a person bites or clenches their teeth. Frequent clenching or grinding may overload the muscle and contribute to tenderness, fatigue, or jaw pain.

The temporalis, a fan-shaped muscle located along the temple, can also become tense or overworked and may contribute to jaw discomfort and headaches.

The medial and lateral pterygoids sit deeper within the jaw and help control opening, closing, forward movement, and side-to-side movement. Evaluating these muscles can be particularly relevant when jaw tightness or limited movement is part of a patient's symptoms.

According to the [National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research \(NIDCR\)](#), temporomandibular disorders affect about 5% of adults in the United States. Estimates vary depending on the population and diagnostic criteria used, underscoring the importance of individualized evaluation when people experience persistent jaw symptoms.

The Neck and Upper Back May Also Play a Role

One of the less obvious connections discussed by Capitol Physical Therapy is the relationship between TMJ symptoms and the muscles of the neck and upper back.

The sternocleidomastoid, upper trapezius, and suboccipital muscles can influence head and neck positioning. When these areas become tense or when posture changes how the head, neck, and jaw work together, some people may experience increased tension around the jaw.

Prolonged desk work and phone use can contribute to forward-head posture and stiffness in the neck and shoulders. For some people, these patterns may increase muscular demand around the jaw and contribute to ongoing tension.

This may help explain why TMJ symptoms can occur alongside headaches, neck pain, or upper-back discomfort rather than appearing as an isolated jaw problem.

Clenching and Muscle Tension Can Compound Symptoms

Several everyday habits can place additional stress on the muscles surrounding the jaw.

Teeth clenching, teeth grinding, frequent gum chewing, and nail biting may contribute to TMJ symptoms. Stress can also increase jaw clenching or persistent muscle tension, potentially making existing symptoms more difficult to manage.

The exact cause of TMJ pain is not always clear, and multiple factors may contribute at the same time. This is one reason a comprehensive assessment can be useful for determining which muscles, joints, movement patterns, or lifestyle factors may be involved.

How Physical Therapy Can Address the Muscles Behind TMJ Pain

Physical therapy is one conservative treatment option for TMJ pain, particularly when muscular or movement-related factors are contributing to symptoms.

A physical therapist may assess the jaw, face, neck, shoulders, and upper back rather than focusing exclusively on the jaw joint. Treatment can then be tailored to the individual's symptoms and contributing factors.

Treatment may include manual therapy and soft-tissue techniques designed to address muscle tightness and improve mobility. In appropriate cases, specially trained physical therapists may also use intraoral manual techniques, with patient consent, to address muscles that are difficult to reach externally.

Therapeutic exercise may also be incorporated into treatment. Depending on the patient's presentation, exercises may address jaw mobility and coordination, neck strength, or the way the jaw, neck, and upper back work together during movement.

Postural retraining may be another component when head, neck, or shoulder positioning contributes to symptoms. Treatment may include exercises targeting the deep neck flexors and upper back while addressing forward-head posture.

Dry Needling May Be One Treatment Option

For some patients, dry needling may be incorporated into a broader physical therapy treatment plan.

The technique involves inserting thin, sterile needles into selected muscle or connective-tissue areas to address myofascial pain and muscle tension. Capitol Physical Therapy notes that dry needling may be considered for muscles including the masseter and temporalis when clinically appropriate.

A 2025 review cited by the clinic reported that dry needling, either alone or alongside other therapies, may help reduce pain and improve function in people with TMJ disorders. However, treatment should be individualized, since an approach that is appropriate for one type of temporomandibular disorder may not be appropriate for another.

A Whole-Body Approach to Jaw Pain

For people living with persistent TMJ symptoms, understanding the muscular and postural factors that may contribute to discomfort can provide a broader perspective on treatment.

Rather than focusing solely on the location of the pain, physical therapists may assess how the jaw, neck, shoulders, and upper back work together. This whole-body approach can help identify contributing factors and guide an individualized plan focused on pain management, mobility, and function.

About Capitol Physical Therapy

Capitol Physical Therapy provides individualized physical therapy services in Washington, DC, and Upper Marlboro, Maryland. The practice offers treatment for orthopedic and pain-related conditions and uses a range of evidence-informed approaches, including manual therapy, therapeutic exercise, postural retraining, and dry needling when appropriate.

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