

TMJ INJURIES FROM WHIPLASH: GETTING THE RIGHT DIAGNOSIS

It's estimated that we use the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), a ball-and-socket hinge at the back of the jaw, up to 5,000 times a day when we talk, yawn, or chew.

According to the Radiological Society of North America in 1990, a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) study showed that TMJ injuries occurred in 87 percent of whiplash patients after car accidents. None of the patients surveyed suffered direct trauma to the jaw, the face, or the mouth. As the RSNA report stated, "Physicians have always assumed that injuries to the cervical spine cause whiplash symptoms, but they've overlooked the jaw."

Delicate blood vessels, nerves, and connective tissues can be crushed in an accident, but until there has been advanced tissue breakage, the symptoms don't always appear. This is why it's important to get an accurate diagnosis before you file a personal injury claim.

TMJ Injury Symptoms

TMJ injuries from a whiplash-type accident can get worse without treatment and have delayed symptoms, which can include:

- Inability to open the mouth widely or pain when doing so
- Pain and tightness in the shoulders, neck, or face
- Chronic headaches and ear pain
- Pain and difficulty chewing or biting
- Popping, clicking, or grating noises in the jaw
- Hearing loss or dizziness
- Swelling along the side of the face
- Locking of the jaw

Lawyers and trauma physicians have had experience with patients and clients who were originally diagnosed with neck strain but have ongoing symptoms, including severe head pain, which is unexpected from trauma to the soft tissue of the neck. Medical providers have dismissed such symptoms as psychological, perhaps because of a failure to recognize the source of the ongoing pain.

Getting a Proper Diagnosis

Delays in a TMJ injury diagnosis can happen because the doctor and the patient don't notice the symptoms or connect them to the cause. Patients tend not to show any outward signs of an injury, but can feel pain in the neck or cervical spine.

Understanding the cause of the injury is crucial for an accurate diagnosis. Soft tissue wounds can occur in collisions which involve slow speeds and little to no vehicle damage.

In a typical whiplash injury, a victim's head, sitting free above the seat, is whipped toward the point where the car is struck. For example, in a rear-end collision, the car is pushed forward, and the victim's head is whipped backward.

Muscles connect the lower jaw to the head and to the sternum or breastbone, a long, flat bone in the center of the chest. The muscles associated with the temporomandibular joint are placed under extraordinary pressure, pulling the jaw open and exerting force on the sides of the head where the jaw attaches to the skull. This may cause the jaw to stretch soft tissue. The focal point of the force associated with the rapid and severe movement in a whiplash-type injury is the temporomandibular joint.

Filing a Personal Injury Claim

TMJ injuries can be extremely painful and devastating to patients and their loved ones.

Insurance companies tend to dismiss TMJ personal injury claims, as the wounds can be hard to spot without an accurate diagnosis. Doctors, patients, and lawyers need to recognize the potential for such injuries and their symptoms, especially when collaborating to file a personal injury claim.