

# My Diagnosis

## Why Did My Jaw Hurt for So Long?

BY ALISA HRUSTIC

**M**y first symptom—a swollen, achy neck—could've been anything. But as spring bloomed into summer, stranger things cropped up. A recurrent pinching sensation in my ears. Sharp pains all around my face. And, far worse than a tension headache, it felt as if a power drill were chiseling away at my temples.

After a useless telehealth call with a general physician, I tracked down an ear, nose, and throat specialist (ENT) for another virtual appointment. She told me it might be a problem with my temporomandibular joint (TMJ). We each have two of them, and they connect the lower jaw to the skull, allowing the mouth to move.

I'd never had issues

with my jaw, so I was skeptical. But the very next day, the pain struck again—hard. It felt as if a rubber band had been tied around my jaw and it was going to snap at any minute. I could barely brush my teeth. Even chewing solid food was a struggle. Soon I was subsisting on soups and smoothies, and this went on for a couple of months. Between that and my skyrocketing anxiety, I'd later realize that my overall health was suffering and I'd lost 15 lbs, which made me feel extremely weak.

I found a dentist who agreed to see me in person even during the pandemic, and I left with a pricey mouth guard and a prescription for 1,800 mg of ibuprofen a day. He told me to

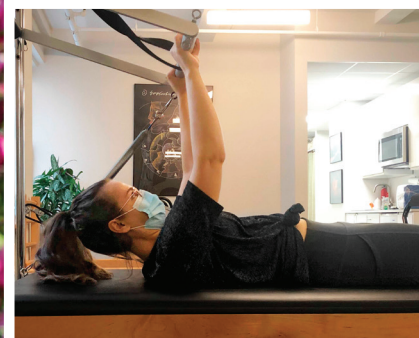
de-stress by “taking a walk outside or reading a book”—not helpful. As another month passed, my pain grew worse.

### THE TIPPING POINT

One day I yawned without thinking about it and heard an unsettling crack. The pain rushed back, and I was terrified that I'd caused serious damage. Determined to find an empathetic medical professional, I did some digging and landed in the office of Nojan Bakhtiari, D.D.S., a board-certified TMJ and orofacial pain specialist in New York City.

Bakhtiari spent more than an hour examining every aspect of my jaw, observing the way my mouth opened and closed, pinpointing pain spots along the way. He explained that TMD (temporomandibular disorder) is an umbrella term for problems in the muscles, joints, and ligaments that involve functional jaw motions such as chewing and yawning. Yes, my TMJ was acting up, but it wasn't a simple case that ibuprofen could fix. He used an anatomical skull to show me what was happening: The thin piece of cartilage that sat between the head of my

COURTESY OF SUBJECT.



Physical therapy exercises, like the one pictured here, focused on strengthening my neck, shoulders, and back to help support my jaw.

mouth guard); muscle relaxers to ease the spasms in my face, neck, and back; and 12 weeks of physical therapy.

During my first physical therapy consultation I cried, because I finally felt like I had support from experts who took my struggle seriously.

“You may feel pain again, but the goal is to make sure it never happens like this first flare,” said Amy DelVecchio, D.P.T., O.C.S., my physical therapist at Pivotal Physical Therapy in New York City. “And next time you'll be more prepared to manage it.”

Ten months after my jaw first locked up, I'm out of physical therapy and nearly pain-free. I can now (carefully) eat a bagel, floss my teeth, wake up without headaches, and laugh without worrying. There's lingering tension in my jaw and back, and my ears crackle occasionally, but my face is finally starting to feel like my own again.

jawbone and my skull was slipping out of place. Because of that, I had a closed lock—meaning my jaw couldn't open with full range of motion—that was likely aggravated by my unconsciously clenching my teeth during periods of stress and while sleeping. That triggered spasms in my facial muscles, which was why I'd felt so much pain and my headaches had worsened. And while these are not common, TMD can cause stiffness, pain, ringing, and popping in the ears.

### THE DIAGNOSIS

Bakhtiari diagnosed me with muscle and joint pain, as well as articular disk disorder of my right TMJ. He prescribed an orthotic (a specialized