



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Broken or dislocated jaw

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Broken or dislocated jaw

A broken jaw is a break (fracture) in the jaw bone. A dislocated jaw means the lower part of the jaw has moved out of its normal position at one or both joints where the jaw bone connects to the skull (temporomandibular joints). A jaw bone joint is called the temporomandibular joint (TMJ).

Considerations

A broken or dislocated jaw usually heals well after treatment. But the jaw may become dislocated again in the future.

Complications may include:

- Airway blockage
- Bleeding
- Breathing blood or food into the lungs
- Difficulty eating (temporary)
- Difficulty talking (temporary)
- Infection of the jaw or face
- Pain of the jaw joint (TMJ) pain and other problems
- Numbness of part of the jaw or face
- Problems aligning the teeth
- Swelling

Causes

The most common cause of a broken or dislocated jaw is injury to the face. This may be due to:

- Assault
- Industrial accident
- Motor vehicle accident
- Recreational or sports injury
- Trips and falls

- After a dental or medical procedure

Symptoms

Symptoms of a broken jaw include:

- Pain in the face or jaw, located in front of the ear or on the affected side, that gets worse with movement
- Bruising and swelling of the face, bleeding from the mouth
- Difficulty chewing
- Misaligned teeth or jaw
- Jaw stiffness, difficulty opening the mouth widely, or problem closing the mouth
- Jaw moving to one side when opening
- Jaw tenderness or pain, worse with biting or chewing
- Loose or damaged teeth
- Lump or abnormal appearance of the cheek or jaw
- Numbness of the face (particularly the lower lip)
- Ear pain

Symptoms of a dislocated jaw include:

- Pain in the face or jaw, located in front of the ear or on the affected side that gets worse with movement
- Bite that feels "off" or crooked
- Problems talking
- Inability to close the mouth
- Drooling because of inability to close the mouth
- Locked jaw or jaw that protrudes forward
- Teeth that do not line up properly

First Aid

A person with a broken or dislocated jaw needs medical attention right away. This is because they may have breathing problems or bleeding. Call 911 or the local emergency number or a local hospital for further advice.

Hold the jaw gently in place with your hands on the way to the emergency room. You can also wrap a bandage under the jaw and over the top of the head. The bandage should be easy to remove in case you need to vomit.

At the hospital, if you have breathing problems, heavy bleeding occurs, or severe swelling of your face, a tube may be placed into your airway to help you breathe.

FRACTURED JAW

Treatment for a fractured jaw depends on how badly the bone is broken. If you have a minor fracture, it can heal on its own. You may only need pain medicines. You will probably have to eat soft foods or stay on a liquid diet for a while.

Surgery is often needed for moderate to severe fractures. The jaw may be wired to the teeth of the opposite jaw to keep the jaw stable while it heals. Jaw wires are usually left in place for 6 to 8 weeks. Small rubber bands (elastics) are used to hold the teeth together. After a few weeks, some of the elastics are removed to allow motion and reduce joint stiffness.

If the jaw is wired, you can only drink liquids or eat very soft foods. Have blunt scissors readily available to cut the elastics in the event of vomiting or choking. If the wires must be cut, call your health care provider right away so that the wires can be replaced.

DISLOCATED JAW

If your jaw is dislocated, a doctor may be able to place it back into the correct position using the thumbs. Numbing medicines (anesthetics) and muscle relaxants may be needed to relax the jaw muscles.

Afterward, your jaw may need to be stabilized. This usually involves bandaging the jaw to keep the mouth from opening widely. In some cases, surgery is needed to do this, particularly if repeated jaw dislocations occur.

After dislocating your jaw, you should not open your mouth widely for at least 6 weeks. Support your jaw with one or both hands when yawning and sneezing.

DO NOT

Do not try to correct the position of the jaw. A doctor should do this.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

A broken or dislocated jaw requires prompt medical attention. Emergency symptoms include difficulty breathing or heavy bleeding.

Prevention

During work, sports, and recreation activities, using safety equipment, such as a helmet when playing football, or using mouth guards can prevent or minimize some injuries to the face or jaw.

Alternative Names

Dislocated jaw; Fractured jaw; Fractured mandible; Broken jaw; TMJ dislocation; Mandibular dislocation

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