

COLUMN

# Headaches caused by gum chewing in children may indicate even bigger problems

A new study suggests that excessive gum chewing may be an important but under-recognized trigger for headaches in older children.

The researchers at Meir Medical Center believe that excessive gum chewing causes headaches not through the ingestion of aspartame from the gum, as has been previously suggested, but by putting undue stress on the temporomandibular joint (TMJ). This study is



Dentally Speaking  
by  
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just another strong piece of evidence supporting how a poor bite plays a large role in causing a TMJ disorder.

Having a misaligned or unbalanced bite in children and adults has been directly related to a myriad of symptoms including headaches, jaw pain,

migraines, ear congestion, ringing in the ears and even vertigo. Therefore, early diagnosis and treatment of a “bad” bite can be crucial in stopping this painful cycle from starting and avoiding future issues with this common TMJ disorder.

**Why we should intervene with children earlier orthodontically:**

- 75% of children, by age 12, have some form of malocclusion (poor bite). If untreated, these will worsen with time.

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portunity to work with a child's growth, treatment can take longer and be more difficult to achieve the ideal outcome.

Early identification of less than ideal jaw development and growth in children is also important in identifying potential risk factors like TMJ disorders and sleep apnea. For years, this has been an important focus of our dental practice. Evaluating and tracking our young patients is routine at all dental appointments to identify any signs of developmental dental problems.

We evaluate and measure our younger patients very carefully in order to determine if early orthodontics (braces), or even orthodontic appliances to facilitate proper growth, are appropriate.

Whether we directly address a child's orthodontic issues in our office, or refer them for an evaluation with an orthodontist, we want to make sure that we are utilizing the window where treatment moves the fastest and easiest for our patients and getting our patients treated at the best time to make the necessary tooth movement.

**Benefits of Early Orthodontic Treatment:**

- Influence jaw growth in a positive manner. Simplifies and/or shortens treatment time.
- Harmonize width of the dental arches for later corrective orthodontics
- Improve speech problems
- Correct harmful oral habits
- Improve breathing and airway problems
- Improve aesthetics and self-esteem

If your child has any of the following signs, please talk to your dentist, if they provide orthodontic services, or seek a consultation with a local orthodontist.

**Signs for Parents to look for:**

1. Poor arch development: Very narrow or V-shaped upper jaw, crowded baby teeth, permanent teeth erupting behind baby teeth

2. Snoring or sleep breathing issues; other signs you may not be aware of that can be symptoms of sleep problems include dark circles under the eyes, large tonsils

3. Lack of tongue space or tongue thrust – if you ask your child to swallow and their tongue sticks out over their lower teeth and lip

4. Cross bite: when your child bites together in their “normal” bite and the upper teeth are behind the lower teeth

5. Vertical deficiency/deep overbite: when your child bites together the front top teeth completely cover their lower teeth

Headaches have been shown to be associated with and be provoked by TMJ dysfunction. When a poor bite is continually used in normal function or overused in bad habits, TMJ symptoms can be aggravated. Chewing gum, as well as other oral habits (such as clenching and teeth grinding) also cause a mechanical burden on the joint of patients with a non-ideal bite. If a person's bite is properly balanced with the surrounding facial muscles and TMJ joints, then these painful symptoms can be significantly minimized or completely avoided.

Jeffrey S. Haddad D.D.S. of Doolin & Haddad Advanced Dentistry completed his dental education at the University of Michigan in 2001. Dr. Haddad is a fellow of the prestigious Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies. He lectures nationally on cosmetic dentistry, TMJ disorders and practice management.

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