

Opinion: Look out below. 'Tis the season of jaw injuries

By Dr. Patricia A. Richard

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Ice hangs from a sign alongside an icy road.
Mel Evans/Associated Press

It is time to watch for icy sidewalks. It's also ice hockey season. It is just about always the season for the ever-growing sport of pickleball. As well, unfortunately, car accidents are always in season.

All can result in accident-caused jaw injuries.

For hockey, of course, a mouth guard is necessary, although it may not be enough to completely protect the jaw from an injury. But there are no mouth guards required for walking on slippery leaves or icy sidewalks — or for playing pickleball. Maybe they should be.

A slip and fall could easily result in a jaw injury — an injury that may go unnoticed for a while. Even a seemingly minor bump can push the jaw out of alignment — or worse.

Unfortunately, some soft tissue damage can occur without your realizing it. When the disc or jaw joints slip, blood vessels and nerves are pinched, causing radiating pain that can expand to the face. Even a small misalignment of the jaw eventually may cause vascular headaches that feel like severe migraines.

Jaw injuries also can affect the inner ear, causing a host of symptoms that range from dizziness to congestion and a feeling of stuffiness or “fullness” in the ear — a condition that may lead you to think you have developed or aggravated allergies. It is very easy to regard symptoms as arising from just about anything, *except* that seemingly minor bump to the jaw.

Three-dimensional dental cone beam computed tomography (CT) is a special type of X-ray used when regular dental or facial X-rays are not sufficient. This technology produces 3D images of teeth, soft tissues, nerve pathways and bone in a single scan. It can quickly identify the problem, providing the medical team clear information for prescribing a course of treatment.

There is a way to check yourself, too. Can you open your mouth very wide without pain? Does the gap in the two top front teeth no longer line up with the gap in the bottom two? Are there muscle spasms on a side of the face. Eye, cheek or neck twitching? Is there a “clicking” sound when the jaw is opened wide?

Do you seem bothered by allergies this year and don’t normally have them? Have you been involved in an accident of some kind recently? It could easily be a new problem with the jaw.

It all may stem from damage to the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), which acts like a sliding hinge, connecting the jawbone to your skull. There is one on each side of the jaw.

The exact cause is often tough to determine. In addition to an accident, it even could be caused by genetics or arthritis.

There are many treatment options. A medical team could determine something as simple as a personalized mouth guard may help. For others, more complex treatments may be needed. The way to start, of course, is to consult with you physician/dentist.

Meanwhile, watch out for icy sidewalks.

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