

Got Painful TMJ? Botox Can Help With That



Welcome to Try Before You Buy, a monthly series where we talk about the pricey beauty products and in-office treatments that are getting major buzz and give our honest feedback.

If you've ever woken up with a massive headache or jaw pain, you may have TMJ disorder—a condition that causes pain and discomfort in the jaw area. One surprising treatment? Botox. When you think about Botox, you probably think about it as an anti-aging treatment, and you're not wrong—but there's so much more to the popular injectable. To better understand how Botox can treat TMJ, we tapped Y. Claire Chang, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist in New York City.

What is TMJ?

TMJ, or the temporomandibular joint, is a joint that connects the jawbone to the temporal bone in your skull, and TMJ disorder causes pain and discomfort in that area. Dr. Chang says that symptoms of TMJ include pain or tenderness of the jaw, aching pain in or around the ears, clicking, popping, or grating sounds when opening and closing the mouth, locking of the joint, difficulty and pain with chewing, pain extending to the neck and shoulders, and headaches. "Some patients also complain of facial swelling, ear fullness, tinnitus (ringing sound in the ears), or eye pain," she adds. According to a 2017 study, it is estimated that 10 million Americans have TMJ disorders, and while the cause isn't always clear, factors that can contribute to TMJ are genetics, arthritis, jaw injuries, and teeth misalignment.

How does Botox help with TMJ?

Botox was originally created for medical purposes and has been used to treat crossed eyes, involuntary muscle contractions, excessive sweating, migraines, urinary incontinence, and wrinkle reduction. Because of its ability to reduce involuntary muscle contractions, it can also prevent teeth grinding and clenching. "Botox is used off-label to treat TMJ-related pain, headaches, grinding, and clenching," says Dr. Chang. "It's injected into the TMJ muscles which causes relaxation and shrinkage of these hyperactive muscles to relieve pain." Although it's not FDA-approved yet, Botox's effect on treating TMJ just recently passed phased two of its clinical trial, and for years, it's been widely used by doctors off-label for this and is considered safe.

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What are the side effects of getting Botox for TMJ?

"It can cause injection-related discomfort, local tenderness, bruising, or swelling," Dr. Chang explains. "Difficulty chewing may occur from local muscle weakness and is usually dose-dependent and temporary." A cosmetic side effect could be face slimming around the jaw area—patients won't be grinding or clenching their teeth anymore, so all the muscle build-up will dissolve and will therefore slim the face. Dr. Chang notes, though, that these side effects are very uncommon and mild.

What should you take into account before getting Botox in your jaw?

While the price of Botox injections ranges depending on your location and practitioner, each unit can range anywhere between \$10-\$25, and the amount of units you need is determined by the severity of your TMJ and your doctor's advice. Also, while Botox is offered by many dentists off-label to treat TMJ, Dr. Chang recommends getting treatment from an experienced board-certified dermatologist or a general practitioner to avoid any adverse effects or complications.

Is there anyone who should stay away from getting Botox?

According to Dr. Chang, people who are breastfeeding shouldn't get Botox since the toxin can transfer via breast milk to the baby. While there isn't any clinical evidence that proves that Botox is harmful to the fetus of a pregnant woman, Dr. Chang also suggests that those who are expecting stay away from the injectable just to be on the safe side.