

# After the Accident: Is it a Brain Injury ... or Not?

*Solutions for Pain from the Michigan Head & Neck Institute*



Note: Sometimes, the biggest hurdle an ailing person must overcome is to get someone to believe them when they reveal how much they hurt. Dr. Richard Klein understands. Years ago he was in an auto accident, and he truly learned the meaning of pain. It taught him never to dismiss a patient's concerns; those in pain know what they're experiencing.

In an accident or injury such as a slip and fall, a war injury, or even a mild injury from a sporting activity where the head or neck takes a hit, there's the potential for lingering pain from that trauma. It might reveal itself in the form of dizziness or hearing changes. The individual's vision might be blurred, or perhaps there's pain behind the eye. There might be constant headaches or excessive watering of the eyes. These are only some of the symptoms of traumatic brain injury — but, to

compound the diagnosis further, they're also symptoms of TMJ, or temporomandibular joint dysfunction. It's entirely possible that the brain injury, serious as it is, may not be causing these annoying symptoms, but that TMJ is. Fortunately, TMJ is a much simpler challenge to address.

"Most medical physicians don't look for TMJ when observing an injured patient because it's a dental problem and, generally, you have to be a dentist to treat it," explains Dr. Richard Klein, an internationally recognized professor who trains doctors around the world in the seriousness of pain, as well as TMJ and sleep apnea, and serves as director of the Michigan Head & Neck Institute. His calming nature puts people at ease as he explains their injuries.

"TMJ involves a joint in the body and, if you

experience it, it should be treated medically like any other injured joint. It's important to begin by relaxing the muscles and getting the inflammation out," Dr. Klein says.

That may mean an injection or physical therapy. For more advanced cases, Dr. Klein creates a mouthpiece that can be worn 24 hours a day at first, if needed. After the joint heals, it's generally worn only at night. The mouthpiece is small and inconspicuous, and is meant to keep the jaw stable and in position — preventing those who grind their teeth from doing further damage. "Grinding only makes TMJ worse," Dr. Klein says. "It's the equivalent of tap-dancing all day on a sprained ankle."

Because more than 50 percent of people with head injuries have obstructive sleep apnea, Dr. Klein further warns head trauma sufferers of the seriousness of this disease, which claims the lives of as many as 200,000 Americans each year. Beyond that, sleep apnea causes memory problems, depression, headaches, irritability ("similar to PMS"), and weight gain.

It's easy to understand how those with head injuries often suffer from obstructed sleep. Typically the muscles in the neck and head become lax, making it easier for the throat to collapse. Individuals may also become sedentary, causing them to gain excess weight that also accumulates around the neck.

Some people with sleep apnea respond well to wearing a breathing mask, or CPAP machine. However, many find the mask claustrophobic and uncomfortable, or find the machine noisy and difficult to maneuver. They claim its straps bother the head, which may already be prone to headaches. Likewise, some individuals with head injuries aren't able to comprehend how to use it, or how to care for it and clean it.

For these patients, Dr. Klein has found successful treatment, again, in a small special mouthpiece that's created specifically for sleep apnea. It realigns the jaw and secures the tongue at night. It travels easily, and is less cumbersome and more inconspicuous than the CPAP machine. Most insurance plans contribute to its cost.

"Where there are lingering symptoms affecting the head and neck," Dr. Klein says, "it's important not to rule out TMJ and sleep apnea." Dr. Klein has treated more than 5,000 individuals at the Michigan Head & Neck Institute. If you need help, there's no one better.

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