

Trigeminal Neuralgia

Condition: Trigeminal neuralgia (TN) is a chronic pain condition that affects the nerve that delivers sensation from your face to your brain.

Background: Patients typically experience pain either spontaneously or following mild stimulation, such as washing the face, shaving, brushing teeth, or chewing.

Risk Factors: TN sometimes occurs in concert with multiple sclerosis and is more often diagnosed in those over the age of 40.

History and Symptoms: Pain is typically only on one side of the face, although sometimes patients experience pain on both sides of the face during different episodes. Patients report a sudden stabbing pain that lasts for seconds to a few minutes with no pain between episodes. Pain is provoked by mild stimuli to the face (gentle touching, washing, eating, etc.). Other stimuli such as bright lights, loud noises, or tastes can occasionally provoke this pain. Pain may prevent or limit eating or drinking.

Physical Exam: Because TN is a clinical disease, a physical examination is likely to be normal, but examination of the head and neck, including the mouth, teeth, and jaw joint, and a neurological examination are useful in order to rule out other conditions. Typical trigger areas, which are commonly around the mouth, should be examined. Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physicians are trained to perform these types of detailed neurological and musculoskeletal examinations, which is critical to accurately diagnose TN.

Diagnostic Process: MRI may be useful to identify tumors, multiple sclerosis plaques, or blood vessel contact with the affected nerve, as this contact is the underlying cause of pain in the majority of cases. Examination of the reflexes in this region is the most reliable diagnostic test for this pain.

Rehab Management: Pain from TN can usually be managed with medications, such as anti-seizure medications, certain types of antidepressants, and, for severe cases, opioids. Acupuncture, relaxation, and meditation may also be beneficial in conjunction with medications. Pain procedures, such as nerve blocks, may be very effective for TN. Surgery to alleviate the vessel compression of the affected nerve can be performed in cases that are not controlled by other therapies. PM&R physicians are skilled at managing TN with all of the above listed options (with the exception of surgery, which would require a Neurosurgeon).

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Resources for patient support are available at the [TNA Facial Pain Association website](#). If pain is limiting eating and drinking, a nutritional consultation may be necessary.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.