

A Refurbished Mouth...

One of the most common comprehensive dental problems we see is what we call a *reduced occlusal vertical dimension*. I know that sounds like a lot of gibberish, but please let me explain. A person's vertical dimension is the height of their bite, if you will. In other words, the way your teeth come together affect the way your lower face looks. A quick reference is to look at the distance from your chin to the bottom of your nose. If this distance is less than the distance from the base of your nose to the top of your eyebrows, you probably have a reduced vertical dimension of occlusion.

There is a variety of issues that can work alone or together to cause a short lower face. Losing your back teeth, or any of your teeth for that matter, can cause your bite to close down. Wearing your teeth down from grinding, clenching, acid reflux, or age can also cause you to lose your bite height. If your teeth are crowded, crooked, or "leaned over," you probably have lost some vertical. Just like a teenager that slouches while he walks, your teeth cannot be all they can be when out of alignment. Finally, the most common cause of reduced vertical dimension of occlusion is...old dentures. Over time, old dentures wear down and close up the space between your chin and your nose. The bone that holds the dentures in place also starts to disappear. That is why it is easy to spot someone who has false teeth; it's usually the reduced vertical that gives it away.

So why is this actually a problem? For starters, people with a reduced vertical tend to constantly look unhappy. This is because the loss of bite height causes the corners of the mouth to droop down. It's like constantly frowning for no reason at all. A reduced vertical can also cause a variety of jaw joint (TMD) issues. Basically, the way your teeth come together determines the way your jaw joint functions. These issues can manifest as headaches, earaches, sore neck or jaw muscles, and even breathing problems. Finally, a reduced vertical adds wrinkles to your lower face and gives the appearance of being old. That seems to be the deciding factor for most of our patients.

The good news is that we have a lot of solutions to this problem. The easiest is in the case of worn out dentures. It is amazing how much a new set of teeth can add to one's looks. We have literally made people look years younger just by making a new set of "plates." When we straighten crooked teeth (orthodontics), we now take lower face height into account. I am truly proud when we open someone's bite and make them prettier and healthier. Finally, we can refurbish those old, worn down teeth with a full set of crowns and put you back to where you were. It's amazing the vitality you can add to a smile this way. A combination of any or all of these treatments can reduce or eliminate symptoms of TMD.

My hope is that I've managed to take a complicated subject and uncoiled it a bit. If I haven't, come by or send me an email and we'll talk. Until next time, keep smiling.

-Questions or comments can be sent to Drs. Parrish at ParrishDental@aol.com.