

## **Small Changes ... Big Difference**

by Gary DeWood, DDS, Clinical Director

Do you like raspberries? I do. Have you noticed how those little seeds get in your teeth and change how your bite feels? I mess around with my tongue, a toothpick, my toothbrush, sometimes my finger until they're gone and I can bite my teeth together normally again. It just feels so good. I've noticed the same reaction in patients when I return harmony between their jaw joints and their bite.

The human jaw joint (the temporomandibular joint or "TMJ") is unique in your body. It rotates, it slides, and it does both at the same time. It does all this on one side or on both sides simultaneously.

Small changes in the way teeth interact are accounted for in the movement of your jaws by muscle memory. You learn to work around things because the differences are very small and change very slowly (unlike the raspberry seeds that cause change quickly). These changes are caused by many things including fillings, grinding, clenching, gum disease, habits, and injuries, to name a few.

Because these changes occur over a span of years, the differences never feel abnormal to you. Sometimes they only become evident when a tooth hurts, becomes loose, or breaks. You're surprised! Everything was fine, why did this happen all of a sudden ... on Sunday ... or the day before we were leaving for vacation!?

Dentists such as yours, who study at the Pankey Institute, have spent substantial time looking at and looking for the earliest signs of these changes. That begins at your first visit. A comprehensive oral health evaluation includes study of the relationship between your teeth and your jaw joints, and the relationship between your upper teeth and your lower teeth.

You may be completely unaware of overworked muscles (they're usually tender when pushed on or squeezed), cracked teeth (they usually don't hurt until the crack gets way inside), or a shift in your jaw as your teeth come together (you've trained yourself to make the teeth hit where most of them touch each other). When you become aware of a problem the solution may be quite different from what would be appropriate had it been discovered earlier.

If you have suffered significant dental problems, you don't need me to tell you about the problems. The signs are pretty easy for you to see (and feel). Your dentist is looking for the signs that foretell the problems.

Raspberry seeds are quite small unless they are lodged on the chewing surface of a tooth. They feel absolutely boulder-like then. You can imagine that, for you to remain unaware of changes that are occurring in your bite, they must be pretty small. You're right. The problem is that they add up, and as they add up, they feel normal to you. That's why you're surprised.

Casts, or models, of your teeth, when appropriately studied with all the information noted during your comprehensive evaluation, can give your dentist information that confirms the signs. They also provide an opportunity to plan the necessary actions to correct and reverse the changes.

What I've noticed is my patients' amazement at how good their bite feels when these changes are corrected. They have "that look" on their faces. You know the look, the "no more raspberry seeds on my teeth and it feels good" look.

They say they can't believe how their bite feels. They report a feeling they could not have imagined, but like the raspberry seeds being gone, they know when it happens. It feels so good, and that feeling is a sign that functional harmony has been achieved – a feeling and a fact that improves the likelihood of lifelong oral health.