

Is Masticatory Performance Important for Gastrointestinal Health?

Karin Harumi Uchima Koecklin*

Lecturer at Postgraduate Unit, Faculty of Dentistry, National University of San Marcos, Lima, Peru

***Corresponding Author:** Karin Harumi Uchima Koecklin, Lecturer at Postgraduate Unit, Faculty of Dentistry, National University of San Marcos, Lima, Peru.

Received: February 28, 2018; **Published:** April 02, 2018

A good occlusion helps in the oral functions such as mastication and deglutition, being this achieved by a proper interdigitation of the teeth in the maxillary bones. The objective of all dental treatment is to restore this dental occlusion and give harmony to the stomatognathic system, in order to perform both mastication and deglutition among other activities. So is a proper occlusion only focused on the oral mastication and health of the mouth, or does this occlusion influence other systems?

It is common to find old people with masticatory deficiency due to absence of many teeth which alters their occlusion. In order to help in the mastication dental prosthodontics, dental implants treatments, etc. are conducted in order to restore the lost teeth to achieve a proper occlusion.

The quantity of teeth and distribution of occlusal contacts between the teeth help in the disintegration of the food into the digestive bolus, which is then swallowed in order to proceed to digestion in the gastrointestinal tract. If food is properly condensed into a bolus, then digestion will be easily accomplished. On the other hand, if food is swallowed in big pieces, this will give more work to the stomach to digest the food. There are some studies that found that there is inflammation of the gastrointestinal mucosa in patients with masticatory deficiency, however there are not many studies to support this.

In older patients with tooth loss, the only way to restore mastication is by use of dental prosthodontic appliances, fixed or removable, or dental implants. Although dental implants give a best option of rehabilitation, there is still a lot of population that use removable appliances, especially elder patients. As people get older, masticatory force, and difficulty to use the prosthetic appliances due to pain, poor comfort, etc., make these patients to change their diet as chewing hard food becomes more difficult. This change in the diet may result in soft diet and liquid based diet, which will change the dynamics in the digestion. Soft and liquid diet may also influence the fecal formation. All these changes may or may not affect the gastrointestinal mucosa.

In my dental practice I have seen some of these cases, and after improving the dental occlusion, patients tend to change their diet into a more varied and healthy one, improving their digestion.

Although dental health and proper occlusion and mastication is important, there is poor evidence that relates tooth loss and gastrointestinal problems, so more research in this area is needed.

As older population is increasing, it would be interesting to improve every aspect in their lives to give them a better quality of life.

Volume 5 Issue 5 May 2018

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