

What is terminal dentition?

I am not a person who gets too attached to “things,” at least not in a sentimental way. I tend to save my sentiment for little things like naps on the couch watching cartoons with the kids. Don’t get me wrong, I certainly have a favorite pair of work boots and old blue jeans, but when they get worn out, I happily upgrade. My better half might disagree with this assessment, pointing out the variety of useless objects around the barn and in my closet. Truth be told, most of these objects are around because I just might need that old pair of baseball leggings someday. Always be prepared...

Of the many things that we do get attached to, teeth should be at the top of the list. How else do we plan on eating, talking, and smiling each and every day?

In reality, most of us only notice our teeth when one hurts or when that dental postcard shows up in the mailbox every six months. In a way, teeth are a lot like insurance. You don’t really notice them so much until you really need them or don’t have enough.

One of the more difficult conversations we dentists have on a regular basis has to do with terminal dentition. Terminal dentition refers to the point in time where a person’s own teeth are so diseased that they must be replaced with something new. Terminal dentition comes about due to a combination of disease factors. Gum disease, tooth wear, genetics, drug addiction, xerostomia or dry mouth, cavities, a life of smoking, trauma or accidents, poor oral hygiene, prior tooth loss, systemic diseases, and failing restorations can all contribute to the final loss of one’s teeth. The development of terminal dentition often takes years and is usually multifaceted. It is quite common for patients to come in with the very thought in mind. “Doc, I think it is finally time to move on to the next step of getting some new teeth.”

Out with the old and in with the new. Terminal dentition presents an opportunity for improved health and dramatically improved smiles. Today’s replacement options; esthetic implant retained dentures and implant supported bridges, are a far cry from George Washington’s wooden teeth. Each year we get better and better at replacing teeth with teeth, as opposed to hunks of plastic. We hear many a patient wonder aloud why they didn’t do this sooner.

If the time comes, terminal dentition can be seen as a chance for renewal and growth. As with everything in life, attitude is everything.

May you all have a happy and blessed 2010. Until next year, keep smiling.

-Please send comments to Drs. Parrish at www.ParrishDental.com.