

The Most Frequently Asked Questions About Dental Implants

... A Consumer's Guide to Understanding Implant Treatment

If you are like most people considering dental implants, you probably have a number of questions. The decision to proceed with dental implant treatment is important. It affects your overall health, appearance and well being.

The Institute for Dental Implant Awareness (IDIA) and its member dentists want you to be fully informed about your treatment options and what is involved with the procedures. For that reason, we have dedicated this issue of the IDIA Health Letter to answering the questions most frequently asked by patients.

What Are Dental Implants?

The dental implants used by most dentists and dental specialists are root-form implants, which basically means that they are replacement, or substitute tooth roots, used to replace natural tooth roots in areas of the mouth where teeth are missing.



The part of your natural tooth that is visible is the "crown." Your tooth root is embedded in your jawbone giving the tooth a stable foundation which allows you to bite and chew.

A dental implant is a substitute tooth root, which provides a stable foundation for a replacement crown.



The reason it is so important to replace the tooth root as well as the visible part of the tooth (crown) is that natural tooth roots are embedded in the bone, providing the stable foundation necessary to bite and chew. In essence, the bone holds the tooth roots in place and tooth roots preserve the bone.

When teeth are missing, the bone that previously supported those teeth melts away, or deteriorates. This process is called bone resorption. However, the bone can be preserved by replacing missing tooth roots with dental implants. Since the bone actually forms a strong bond to the implants, they can serve the same functions as natural tooth roots: a strong foundation for biting and chewing, and stimulation for the bone to hold it in place.

What Are Some of the Benefits of Dental Implants?

- Overall quality of life is enhanced with replacement teeth that look, feel and function like natural teeth.** With implant supported replacement teeth, the appearance of the smile is more natural and the teeth function more like natural teeth. The result is increased comfort and confidence when smiling, speaking and eating. If dentures and partials are replaced with implant supported teeth, the overall enhancement in quality of life is even more significant, with an ability to eat all types of foods, elimination of messy adhesives, and improved speech, comfort and appearance.
- Preserves integrity of facial structures.** By preventing the bone resorption that would normally occur with the loss of teeth, the facial structures remain intact. This is particularly important when all of the teeth are missing, as the lower one-third of the face collapses if implants are not placed to preserve the bone.

- **Better health due to improved nutrition and proper digestion.** People with dentures usually have problems eating certain foods, such as fresh vegetables and fruits, which can compromise their nutrition. Additionally, since it is difficult to chew properly with dentures, digestion is often compromised!
- **Adjacent teeth are not compromised to replace missing teeth.** Tooth replacement with traditional tooth-supported bridges requires grinding down the teeth adjacent to the missing tooth/teeth, so that the bridge can be cemented onto them. This tooth structure can never be replaced and the long-term health of these teeth is compromised.



Teeth cut down to pegs for a bridge

Partial dentures have clasps that hook onto adjacent teeth, putting pressure on them as the partial rocks back and forth. Eventually these teeth can loosen and come out as a result of this pressure.

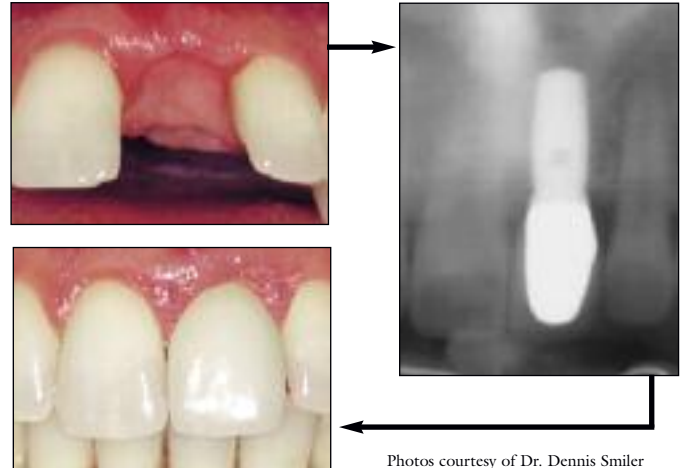
Partial denture which hooks onto natural teeth



Replacing missing teeth with implant supported crowns/bridges does not involve the adjacent natural teeth, so they are not compromised, or damaged.

- **Convenience of hygiene.** It is much easier to care for an implant supported crown, which can be cleaned like a natural tooth. In comparison, a tooth supported bridge requires the use of a floss threader for proper cleaning. It is also easier to clean implant supported replacement teeth than a removable partial.
- **Elimination of denture adhesives.** Since implant supported teeth are securely attached to the implants, there is no need for messy denture adhesives, which are often needed to keep dentures from falling out.

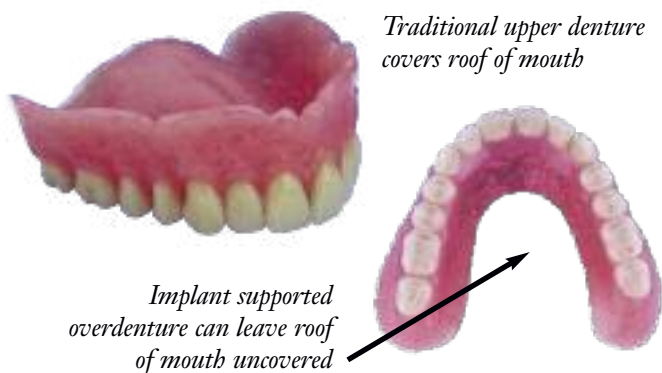
- **The mouth is restored as closely as possible to its natural state.** By replacing the entire tooth, including the root, it is possible to replicate the function of natural teeth, with a strong, stable foundation that allows comfortable biting and chewing. In addition, nothing in the mouth looks, or feels artificial.



Photos courtesy of Dr. Dennis Smiler

- **Increased stability and a sense of security that teeth will not fall out when eating, laughing or sneezing.** People who wear dentures often worry that their dentures will fall out when they laugh, sneeze and sometimes even when they eat. Since the bone bonds to the implants, replacement teeth have a stable foundation and are securely attached to the implants, so there is no fear that teeth will fall out.
- **Improved appearance.** Since implants preserve bone, preventing deterioration of the facial structures, appearance is improved. Collapse of the lower one-third of the face caused by complete tooth loss can be visually corrected and the remaining bone preserved. The appearance of wrinkles around the mouth caused by posterior bite collapse, or complete facial structure collapse are virtually eliminated. Your smile is improved when replacement teeth look more like natural teeth. Even when only one tooth is missing, long term esthetics are usually much better with an implant supported replacement tooth than with a traditional tooth supported bridge. This is particularly important in the front of your mouth, where preventing a visible bone defect is critical for natural appearance.
- **Restored self esteem and renewed self confidence.** Many of the people who now enjoy the benefits of implant supported replacement teeth state that their self esteem and self confidence have been restored as a result of improved appearance, function, comfort and health.

- **Improved ability to taste foods.** Wearing an upper denture can prevent someone from really tasting food, as the roof of the mouth is covered. With implant supported replacement teeth, it is not necessary to cover the roof of the mouth, so it is possible to enjoy the taste of foods.



Who Is a Candidate for Dental Implant Treatment?

Nearly everyone who is missing one or more teeth and in general good health is a candidate for dental implant treatment. There are a few medical conditions that can undermine the success of implant treatment, such as uncontrolled diabetes. However, there are very few conditions that would keep someone from having implant treatment altogether.

Quality and quantity of available bone for implant placement is more often a factor in qualifying for dental implants than medical conditions. However, even people who have lost a significant amount of bone can qualify for dental implant treatment with additional procedures to add bone or create new bone. Advances in this type of treatment have made it possible for thousands of patients who would not previously have been considered candidates to have successful implant treatment.

What Is Involved with Dental Implant Procedures?

Consultation. The first step is an examination and consultation with a dentist or dental specialist to determine whether or not you are a candidate for implant treatment. This usually involves x-rays and may include taking impressions for models of your teeth. If you have already lost a significant amount of bone, additional x-rays taken at another facility that specializes in this type of x-ray may also be recommended.

During the examination, your dentist or dental specialist will be evaluating the area(s) of your mouth where teeth are missing, including the amount of bone available to support the placement of implants. Your dentist will also be evaluating the type of replacement teeth that will best meet your needs. A review of your health history will indicate whether there are any medical conditions that could prevent you from being a candidate for implant treatment.

Following the initial consultation, you may be referred to a dental specialist for another evaluation. If you are referred to a surgical specialist, this will typically be for the purpose of further evaluating the quality and quantity of available bone to determine the number of implants necessary, as well as whether additional procedures may be needed to obtain the desired functional and esthetic result. If you have already lost a significant amount of bone, typically the surgical specialist will be evaluating the possibility of procedures to add (graft) bone, or create new bone.

Implant Placement Procedure. The implants are placed in the bone using a gentle surgical technique. Depending upon the type of implant, it may or may not need to be placed completely under the gum tissue.

Following the implant placement procedure, the implants are left undisturbed for a period of 3 to 9 months so that the bone can grow around the implants to form a strong biological bond to them. During this bone “remodeling” phase, you will have some type of temporary replacement teeth, so that you never have to be without teeth during treatment.

Abutment Attachment Procedure. Following the appropriate bone remodeling period, a small connector post called an abutment is attached to each implant. The permanent replacement teeth will eventually be attached to the abutments.

Fabrication of Replacement Teeth. A series of appointments with your dentist will be needed to take impressions of your teeth and the implant abutments; place temporary replacement teeth; select the appropriate shade for your new teeth and try them for proper fit. In between these appointments, the laboratory technician will fabricate your replacement teeth and the underlying structures that will be attached to the implants.

The diagrams on the following pages illustrate some of the various treatment options available with dental implants. We have selected four different implant solutions, anterior tooth replacement, posterior tooth replacement, complete lower tooth replacement and complete upper tooth replacement. These are only examples, and there are many additional treatment options, which can be determined in a consultation with a dentist or dental specialist.

Implant Treatment Options

Anterior Tooth Replacement *Dental implants make it possible to replace a single missing tooth without compromising adjacent natural teeth.*



Posterior Tooth Replacement *Implant supported replacement teeth, which look, feel and function like natural teeth, are a superior alternative to a partial denture.*



Implant Treatment Options

Complete Tooth Replacement *There are several implant treatment options that are far superior to traditional dentures and provide a level of stability and function that is not possible with dentures.*



Why Does It Take so Long to Complete Treatment?

Dental implants preserve bone because they function like tooth roots, firmly embedded in the bone. In order for the implants to become embedded in the bone, the bone must bond to the implants. This process takes anywhere from 3 to 9 months, depending upon the quality of the bone in which the implants are placed.

There are other treatment options that do not take as long to complete; however, none of these traditional methods of tooth replacement preserve bone. *And, in fact, dentures and partials actually accelerate the bone resorption process.*

Is the Surgical Procedure Painful?

Most implant patients report that the discomfort is far less than they expected, and is much like having a tooth extracted. And although everyone is different with regard to pain tolerance, most patients are very comfortable simply taking Tylenol afterward.

Is It Necessary to Have One Implant Placed for Each Tooth That Is Missing?

No. In fact, it is possible to replace all of the lower teeth with an overdenture that is supported by only 2-4 implants. On the other hand, some dental specialists feel that it is advantageous to replace missing posterior teeth with individual implants to provide additional strength to withstand the forces of chewing for patients who have most of their natural teeth.

Each patient's situation is unique and should be evaluated by a dentist or dental specialist to determine the appropriate number of implants required to support the replacement teeth that will meet the patient's functional and esthetic needs.

Am I too Old for Dental Implants?

Overall health and a desire to improve the quality of life are much more important considerations than age. When dental implants were first developed, back in the 1950's, implant supported replacement teeth were originally designed as a solution for older patients who were missing all of their teeth. Since then, many patients well into their 90's have had dental implant treatment without a single problem.

How Long Do Implants Last?

Documented clinical research demonstrates that implant supported replacement teeth have been successful for over 30 years. These were some of the first root-form implant cases ever completed and they have been closely monitored from the beginning. It is highly likely that these cases will be successful throughout the lifetime of those patients.

Dental implants are designed to be permanent; however many factors contribute to the long term success of implant treatment, such as home care and regular maintenance visits to the dentist or dental specialist.

By comparison, research demonstrates that the typical tooth supported bridge lasts from 7-10 years and that partials and dentures are functional for an average of only 5 years. Insurance statistics indicate that bridges, partials and dentures last 5 years and they generally pay for replacements every 5 years.

Do Dental Implants Ever Fail?

Dental implant treatment is one of the most successful procedures in the medical/dental field, with documented success rates over 95%. Although successful treatment is very predictable, there are rare occasions where the bone does not completely bond to the implants. When this occurs, new implants are placed, and the success rates for the replacement implants are even higher.

Smoking or putting too much pressure on newly placed implants, as with excessive grinding of the teeth, can cause problems with the bone bonding to the implants and should be avoided.

Does the Body Ever Reject Dental Implants?

Several years ago, there was quite a scare about certain types of breast implants, which has caused a number of people to ask if the same thing is possible with dental implants. As indicated above, the success rates for dental implants are extremely high. This is due in part to the fact that root-form implants are made of a safe biocompatible material called titanium. Because titanium is accepted so well by the human body, it is also used for orthopedic implants, such as hip and knee replacements.

If Dental Implants Preserve Bone, Why Would a Dentist Recommend a Tooth Supported Bridge?

Naturally, since dental implants preserve bone, if a patient qualifies as a candidate, implant treatment is usually considered the treatment of choice. However, until the late 1980's, traditional tooth supported bridges were considered the best treatment option for replacing missing teeth.

In addition, there have been many improvements in dental implant systems over the past decade, giving more options for dentists to provide for their patients. Some of the enhancements have resulted in better esthetics for replacement of anterior teeth. Prior to the development of these improvements, some dentists felt that their patients were better served with traditional bridges.

Sometimes teeth that already have large restorations (fillings) can benefit from the protection of crowns attached to traditional bridges. In these cases, particularly in the back of the mouth, where bone melts away much slower when there are adjacent natural teeth, many dentists will still recommend a traditional bridge as opposed to implant treatment.

However, most dentists abhor the idea of grinding down perfect teeth without restorations to place a traditional bridge, and therefore, will almost always recommend dental implant treatment in these cases.

Are There Situations Where a Dental Specialist Would Recommend Extracting a Tooth and Replacing It with an Implant Supported Crown?

There are many situations where natural teeth are either failing, or are about to fail. This includes severe periodontal disease (gum disease) that has eroded the bone that supports teeth. Sometimes in these cases, it is preferable to extract the teeth; eliminate the disease and infection and replace the teeth with implant supported crowns/bridges.

There are also situations where a tooth has had a root canal (nerves have been removed from the tooth) leaving the tooth brittle and susceptible to fracture. In cases where the tooth needs to be retreated and the prognosis is not favorable, it is preferable to extract the tooth and replace it with an implant supported crown.

Teeth with severe fractures are usually extracted and are ideal candidates for replacement with dental implant treatment.

Are There Different Types of Implants?

Although there are different types of implants, the root-form implants are the type most commonly used today. This is primarily due to the extremely high success rates of this type of implant and the fact that they can actually preserve bone, functioning as replacement, or substitute tooth roots.

Another type of implant, which is sometimes used for patients who have lost a significant amount of bone and are not candidates for bone grafting procedures, is an implant frame that rests on top of the bone. However, it does not preserve bone and the documented success rates are not as high as the root-form implants.

Is It Possible to Use an Existing Denture with Dental Implants?

Sometimes it is possible to use a patient's existing denture, as opposed to fabricating a new denture to snap onto dental implants, by altering it to accommodate the necessary attachments. However, there are a number of factors that must be considered. Since each patient's situation is unique, the possibility of using an existing denture can only be determined in consultation with a dentist or dental specialist.

What Is Involved with Taking Care of Dental Implants?

The home care recommended varies depending upon the type of implant supported replacement teeth. For example, a single implant supported crown is cleaned like a natural tooth, with regular brushing and flossing. Implant supported bridges that replace a few teeth are cleaned like tooth supported bridges, brushing and flossing with a floss threader.

Home care is a little more complicated for people who are missing all of their teeth, in that special brushes and floss are often recommended. With overdentures, it is necessary to clean the implant attachments, as well as the overdenture. Permanently fixed implant supported replacement teeth are cleaned like all other bridges.

In all cases, it is recommended that patients see their regular dentist and hygienist at least twice each year unless they routinely see the periodontist, in which case they would continue to alternate visits. If a surgical specialist placed the implants, it is usually recommended that the patient see the specialist at least once each year as well. These visits, combined with proper home care, are essential to the long term success of implant treatment.

What Is The Cost of Implant Treatment?

An investment in dental implant treatment is an investment in overall health, appearance and well being. It involves preserving the integrity of facial structures, as well as replacing missing teeth.

The actual cost of implant treatment is based on a number of factors, such as the number of teeth being replaced, the type of implant supported teeth (treatment option) recommended and whether additional procedures are necessary to achieve the proper esthetic and functional result.

There is often a misconception that there is a set cost for each implant. The fees are calculated based on the amount of time the dentist or dental specialist anticipates spending to complete treatment (implant placement, other surgical procedures, fabrication of replacement teeth,...) as well as the estimated cost of implants, other components and materials necessary to complete treatment and dental laboratory fees.

The only way to accurately estimate the cost for an individual patient is to have an examination and consultation with a dentist or dental specialist. If a dentist and dental specialist work together on a patient's treatment, there is a separate fee for each of the doctors.

Is Dental Implant Treatment Covered by Dental Insurance?

Insurance coverage of implant treatment depends on the individual policy. However, it is rare to receive any substantial coverage. Since the benefit coverage is determined strictly by the amount the employer wants to spend on the policy, and the insurance companies want to

build into their profit margins, there are major limitations on most dental insurance plans. In reality, the plans are only designed to cover routine maintenance, emergencies and basic care.

The insurance companies use statistical data to determine the most common procedures submitted on claims, then set their own "usual and customary fee" schedule for these procedures. They then determine the specific restrictions and limitations for each plan. Because the plans are only intended to cover the basics, there is an annual maximum allowable benefit of \$1,000-\$1,500 on most plans.

Although most companies exclude implants as a covered benefit, many of them will pay the same benefit they would cover for the lowest cost alternative treatment option (partials and dentures) and some of the diagnostic records, if a specific request is made for "alternative benefits". Even if an individual policy includes implants as a covered benefit, the amount of coverage is still limited to the annual maximum allowable.

Does Medical Insurance Cover Implant Treatment?

There are a few cases where medical insurance is available for people who are missing all of their teeth, and as a result, have medical complications. This type of coverage depends solely on the individual policy. Other than these situations, medical coverage is very rare.

Work related injuries and other types of accidents are the other cases that are sometimes covered by insurance. Medicare does not cover implant treatment. All in all, it is best to assume that there is no medical insurance coverage available.

Compliments of:



Institute for Dental Implant Awareness
A non-profit consumer education organization

www.thedentalimplantguide.org