

DENTAL IMPLANTS: AS RELIABLE AS NATURAL TEETH

By Norman J. Pomerance, D.D.S.

Many patients today are considering dental implants to replace individual missing teeth, or to stabilize loose dentures or to replace their removable full and partial dentures entirely. Dental implants are considered to be permanent replacements for natural teeth and can last a lifetime. Once implants are placed, they function as natural teeth do and must have routine maintenance as a natural dentition does. This entails visiting your dentist for regular periodontal therapy (cleanings) including periodic x-rays and reevaluation of the implants as well as your natural teeth. In addition to your regular check-ups, thorough home care, including brushing and flossing, is important for the long term success of the implant(s) as it is for your natural teeth.

An implant is most commonly an artificial tooth root placed in the upper or lower jaw to hold a replacement tooth or bridge. One implant generally replaces one lost tooth. Two or more implants are necessary in order to replace multiple missing teeth. The benefits of an implant are many. When an implant is utilized to replace a missing tooth, there is no need to disturb the adjacent teeth to support a fixed bridge. The bordering teeth remain unaltered since the implant crown is independent of the other teeth. The crown or cap placed upon the implant is as natural looking and esthetic as it would be for your own tooth. When implants are placed to stabilize a loose or ill fitting denture, a level of security and confidence is restored because you can speak and eat without the denture moving or causing pain or discomfort. Older dentures can be refitted with implants or more commonly a new over-denture is made incorporating implant support and retention.

In most instances, a complete denture or a removable partial denture can be completely replaced with an implant supported bridge. Multiple implants are necessary for this restoration but the result is an entire dentition which is non-removable, comfortable, secure and functions most like your natural teeth. Your ability to speak, chew, and smile are restored to a level not experienced perhaps for years.

Are you a candidate for dental implants? Anyone in generally good health can have teeth replaced with implants. Implant placement entails a surgical procedure usually with local anesthesia and at times with further levels of sedation. The procedure usually encompasses one or two appointments before the implant is ready for restoration with a crown or bridge. The healing time for an implant placed in the lower jaw is about three to four months and the healing time for an implant placed in the upper jaw is about six to nine months but these times can vary from patient to patient. In the past there were situations where an implant could not be placed because there was a lack of sufficient bone in either quality or quantity. This is no longer true in most situations. Additional procedures are now available to grow bone in areas needed for implant placement. With these procedures it is possible to successfully place implants virtually anywhere in the mouth they are needed. One procedure is called ridge augmentation where the bone is built up to a height and width to sufficiently support an implant. Another is sinus augmentation where the posterior upper jaw has bone positioned where the sinus would have prevented the placement of an implant.

Before implants can be considered, however, a thorough examination of your teeth, gums, bone levels and a smile evaluation is necessary which should include any necessary x-rays and a review of your medical history. Your dentist can provide this exam for you and will inform you how dental implants could improve your dental health.