

Dental implants, an improved option to consider

by Dr. Rick Borquez

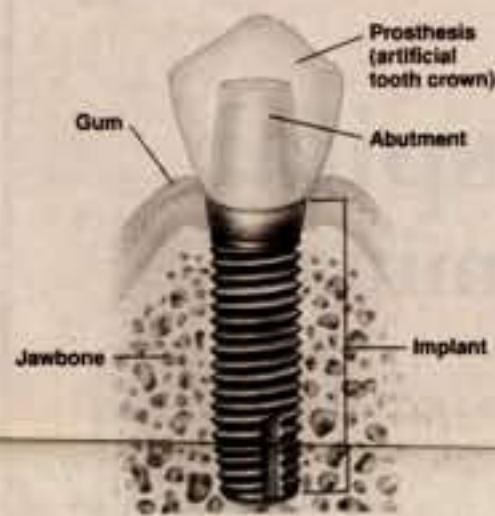
It's no fun when you're missing teeth. You may not feel comfortable eating or speaking. You might even avoid smiling in public. Fortunately, dental implants can help. Implants can replace a single tooth, several teeth, or all the teeth in your mouth. Best of all, they look and feel like natural teeth.

When teeth are missing

It can be embarrassing to have spaces in your mouth where teeth are missing. But you're not alone. Some people lose teeth due to injury, tooth decay, or periodontal disease—infection of gum and bone surrounding teeth. Others may not have had all their teeth grow in. Whatever the reason, dental implants can help replace missing teeth. Implants often feel more natural than dentures or other dental restorations.

Implants can help

If you want a dental restoration that looks and feels as though it's really part of your mouth, dental



implants may be right for you. A dental implant is an artificial tooth root. Your jawbone fuses with the implant to provide a secure platform for a prosthesis—artificial tooth. If you are missing many teeth, several implants can be used to support the partial or complete denture.

Working together

Throughout the implant process you'll work closely with a dental team. Part of the team prepares your jaw and surgically places the implant. Others build and adjust the prosthesis. Your surgeon may be an oral surgeon, periodontist, or general dentist skilled in dental implants procedures. Your restorative dentist may be a prosthodontist or a general dentist.

Understanding your role

Depending on your dental needs, total treatment time for implants can range anywhere from several months up to a year or more. Without a strong commitment from you, implants are less likely to be successful. For best results be prepared to:

- Keep all of your appointments.
- Take good care of your mouth during the implant process.
- Commit to a lifetime of good oral hygiene.
- Have dental checkups at least twice a year.
- Contact team members if you have any problems.

Your Dental Evaluation

To learn whether you're a candidate for dental implants, you will have a dental evaluation. The evaluation includes a dental exam, a dental and medical history, and imaging tests. As part of the exam, the health and structure of your mouth are studied. This helps the dental

team determine where to place the implants.

Your dental exam

An exam supplies important details about the structure of your mouth. Your bite is studied to see how your jaws and teeth fit to-

gether. The condition of your jaws, gums, head and neck is also checked. This is done to see if your mouth is ready to accept implants. During the exam:

The height and width of your jawbones are measured. This is

done to make sure there is enough bone to hold the implant.

Your gums are examined for signs of periodontal disease. Diseased gums need to be treated before implants can be placed.

Your gums are also checked to

see if there is enough firm tissue to surround an implant.

Your Dental History

The more your surgeon learns about you, the more successful your

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Dental implants

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implant surgery is likely to be. Your dental and medical history is an important part of this learning process. It includes questions about your overall health and any previous dental treatments, such as crowns and bridges. You'll also discuss your expectations. Why do you want implants? What do you hope the result will be? Finally, you'll discuss factors that can affect healing after surgery. These include smoking and the use of certain medications.

Ongoing Medical Conditions

If you have an ongoing medical condition, such as diabetes, you may have blood tests. This is to make sure your condition is under control before treatment begins. Also, be sure to tell your surgeon if you take medications, such as insulin or a blood thinner, including aspirin.

The Importance of Imaging Tests

Imaging tests are a key part of the dental evaluation. They make it possible to view parts of the mouth and head that can not be seen during an exam. Imaging tests also help your surgeon learn more about the quantity of the bone in your mouth.

Dental x-rays show teeth and jaws.

Panoramic x-rays provide a wide view of the jaws, teeth, nerves, and sinuses. They can also help indicate a bone problem.

Other imaging tests, such as a CT Scan or x-ray tomography, may also be used.

Forming a treatment plan

After the evaluation, your surgeon and restorative dentist will each discuss treatment options with you. You will also talk about any dental

work or special procedures you may need before the implant process can begin.

A solid foundation for implants

Having a healthy mouth is just as important for implants as it is for natural teeth. If you don't have enough healthy bone or gum tissue in your mouth, you may need a graft before implants can be placed. Grafting helps build a solid foundation for implants. You'll probably have to wait for a graft to heal before you can have implant surgery. If you have periodontal disease, it will also need to be treated prior to placing the implants.

If you need a graft

Graft surgery can build up bone or gum tissue in an area where it's lacking. It can also replace bone and gum tissue that has been lost due to disease or trauma. One type of graft surgery is the sinus lift—a procedure to build up bone at the bottom of the maxillary sinus. This adds height to the jawbone, ensuring enough bone to hold an implant.

- Bone for a graft may be taken from your jaw, hip, or other sources. Sometimes a synthetic (artificial) graft is used.

- A graft to build up gum tissue usually comes from your own mouth.

Outlining Your Treatment Plan

If you're a good candidate for implants, the dental team will talk


with you about a treatment plan. You'll also discuss the costs and time that may be involved. Keep in mind, your commitment during the process will be crucial. In many cases it will take at least several months before new prosthetic teeth can be attached to implants. If you need a graft or treatment for periodontal disease, the process is likely to take longer.

You Have Alternatives

If dental implants are not right for you now, consider your alterna-

tives. One option may be a bridge to replace your missing teeth. If you already have a denture, adjusting it for a better fit may help. You can also decide to have implants at a later time. Together, you and your surgeon will decide what is best for you.

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