

Dental implants

An option for replacing missing teeth

If you are self-conscious about missing teeth or wearing dentures, there's an alternative that may be right for you: dental implants. Dental implants are one option for replacing missing or badly diseased teeth. A dental implant offers comfort and stability and, by virtue of the artificial tooth it supports, is a restoration that is the closest thing to a natural tooth.

WHAT IS AN IMPLANT?

Implants are manufactured "anchors" that look like cylinders or screws. They are artificial replacements for natural tooth roots. Implants are used in upper and lower jaws. They are made of titanium and other materials that are well-suited to the human body. They attach to the jawbone and gum tissue to become a stable base for one or more custom artificial replacement teeth, called dental crowns.

Dental implants have been used for several decades. Patients of all ages have chosen dental implants to replace a single tooth or several teeth or to support partial or full dentures. It's no surprise. Dental implants and their crowns help restore the ability to chew food. They help fill out a face that otherwise could look sunken because of missing teeth. Unlike dentures, implants and crowns are not removed for overnight soaking and cleaning. No adhesives are needed.

THE IMPLANT PROCESS

Treatment generally is a three-part process that takes several months.

■ In the first step, the dentist surgically places the implant in the jaw, with the top of the implant slightly above the top of the bone. A

screw is inserted into the implant to prevent gum tissue and other debris from entering.

The gum then is secured over the implant. The implant will remain covered for approximately three to six months while it fuses with the bone, a process called "osseointegration." There may be some swelling, tenderness or both for a few days after the surgery, so pain medication usually is prescribed to alleviate the discomfort. A diet of soft foods, cold foods and warm soup often is recommended during the healing process.

■ In the second step, the implant is uncovered and the dentist attaches an extension, called a post, to the implant. The gum tissue is allowed to heal around the post. Some implants require a second surgical procedure in which a post is attached to connect the replacement teeth. With other implants, the implant and post are a single unit placed in the mouth during the initial surgery. Once healed, the implant and post can serve as the foundation for the new tooth.

■ In the third and final step, the dentist makes a crown, which has a size, shape, color and fit that will blend with your other teeth. Once completed, the crown is attached to the implant post.

ARE IMPLANTS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Who's a good candidate for implant treatment? You are, if you're in good health and have healthy gums and adequate bone to support an implant. You must be committed to thorough oral hygiene to keep your mouth healthy and to scheduling regular dental visits. Ask your dentist if implants are an option for you. ■

Prepared by the ADA Division of Communications, in cooperation with The Journal of the American Dental Association. Unlike other portions of JADA, this page may be clipped and copied as a handout for patients, without first obtaining reprint permission from the ADA Publishing Division. Any other use, copying or distribution, whether in printed or electronic form, is strictly prohibited without prior written consent of the ADA Publishing Division.

"For the Dental Patient" provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.