

Dental Implants

Are they an option for you?

Dental Implants

Nothing can take the place of a healthy set of teeth, but when disease or an accident ends in tooth loss, it's good to know that there are options for restoring your smile. If you are self-conscious because you have missing teeth or you wear dentures, there is an alternative: dental implants.

Implants have been used for more than a quarter century. And more patients are choosing dental implants as a replacement option, according to the American Dental Association. One survey shows that more than 1.5 million dental implants were placed in a recent year, and that number is expected to grow.

Many patients choose implants to replace a single tooth, several teeth, or to support a full set of dentures. Implants are cylinders that are surgically placed in the upper or lower jaw where they function as a sturdy anchor for replacement teeth. They are made of titanium and other materials that are compatible with the human body.

Single Tooth Implants

The single tooth implant replaces the missing tooth's roots. A single tooth implant is a freestanding unit and does not involve treatment to the adjacent teeth.

If the surrounding teeth are healthy, they can remain untouched, and their strength and integrity may be maintained. The implant can stabilize your bite and help prevent problems with the jaw.

Implant – Supported Bridges and Dentures

Dental implants may be used to support a bridge when several teeth are missing. The bridge replaces the lost natural teeth and some of the tooth roots. An implant-supported bridge does not require support from adjacent teeth.

If you are missing all of your teeth, an implant supported denture can replace the missing teeth and some of the tooth roots. Because the dental implants integrate with the jawbone, an implant-supported denture tends to be comfortable and stable, allowing you to bite and chew naturally,

What's involved?

The placement of an implant generally is a three-part process that takes several months.

In the first step, the dentist surgically places the implant into 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 is then secured over the implant, where it will remain covered for approximately three to six months while the implant fuses with the bone, a process called osseointegration. There may be some swelling and/or tenderness after the surgery, so pain medication is usually prescribed to alleviate the discomfort. Your dentist may recommend a diet of soft foods, cold foods and warm soup 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 surgery in which a post is attached to connect the replacement teeth. With other implants, the implant and post are one 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 custom artificial tooth, called a dental crown, based on a size, shape, color and fit that will blend with your other teeth. Once completed, the crown is attached to the implant post.

If you are missing one or more teeth, there are plenty of reasons to correct the problem:

- A gap between your teeth, if obvious when you smile or speak, is a cosmetic concern.
- Missing teeth may affect your speech.
- Missing a molar might not be noticeable when you talk or smile, but its absence can affect chewing.
- When a tooth is removed, the biting force on the remaining teeth begins to change. As the bite changes. To compensate for the lost tooth, there is a risk of extra pressure and discomfort on the jaw joints, which may lead to temporomandibular disorder, also known as TMD.

- If a missing tooth is not replaced, the surrounding teeth can shift. Harmful plaque and tartar can collect in the new hard-to-reach places created by the shifting teeth. Over time, this may lead to tooth decay and periodontal disease.
- Bone loss can occur in the region of the missing tooth.

Who is a candidate?

If you are in good general health, with healthy gums and a jawbone that can support an implant, this treatment may be an option for you. In fact, your health is more of a factor than your age. Chronic illnesses, such as diabetes or leukemia, may interfere with healing after surgery. And if you use tobacco, you are at greater risk for gum disease, which can weaken the bone and tissue needed to support the implant.

Meticulous oral hygiene is critical to the success of the implant. You'll need to spend a little more time caring for the implant and making sure the area surrounding it is particularly clean. If your overall health is good and your teeth and gums are in good shape, your dentist can determine if you are a suitable candidate for a dental implant.

Other Considerations

Most patients find that an implant is secure and stable – a good replacement for their own tooth. Implants, however, are not an option for everyone. Because implants require surgery, patients should be in good health overall and have healthy gums. And, patients either must have adequate bone to support the implant, or be good candidate for surgery to build up the area needing the implant.

The treatment time for dental implants is longer and the cost higher than that of alternative procedures. Regular dental visits are essential to the life and long-term success for your implant. Some patients are scheduled for professional cleanings two to four times per year. Your dentist will provide you with a dental recall program to ensure the health of your implant and your natural teeth.

Your dentist also will suggest a home-care routine to suit your needs, which will include brushing twice a day and flossing once a day. You may also be advised to use a special toothbrush, an interproximal brush, or a mouth rinse to help prevent cavities and periodontal disease.