

Dental Implants- a patient's guide to success

The purpose of this article is to educate patients and supply them with some basic knowledge, guidelines, and suggestions so they can determine whether or not dental implants are in fact the right treatment choice for them and if so, how do they navigate the task of finding the right dentist for their treatment? Whether you are considering dental implants, have already had your dentist recommend that treatment, or you just want some basic information, this article is for you. Once you decide that you want to consider dental implants, this article is designed to enlighten you as to how to go about taking the necessary steps to make the right decisions that will result in the most successful dental outcome.

Most adult patients have had some amalgam or composite dental fillings placed at some time in their life. They know what to expect when having those procedures performed at their dentist's office. Many have also had a crown or root canal therapy on one or more teeth. However, when the possibility of getting a dental implant presents itself, I find many patients are apprehensive. That's understandable because they're not really sure what it is, what's involved, and how replacement of teeth with dental implants compares to the more widely known restorative options such as a fixed bridge or a removal partial or full denture. Although most patients have probably heard the term implant, they are more cautious about going ahead with what for them is a new treatment option. A few because of lack of knowledge or fear may even forgo dental treatment altogether. Others choose a less desirable but a more familiar treatment alternative. They may have heard about dental implants in the media or from friends, but most individuals are ill-equipped to properly evaluate their own situation. People fear the procedure to be more complicated and painful than it actually is. Friends and relatives bombard the patient with conflicting stories and personal experiences. Advertised costs vary greatly and people may be exposed to terms such as "teeth in day" or "All on Four" and they become even more confused. Without some basic understanding of what an implant actually is, what it can or cannot do, the sequence of events from start to finish, and how implants may be utilized, the dilemma of making the right decision can be unsettling and overwhelming. This need not be the case.

When I first began my dental career many years ago after graduating from dental school in 1971, dental implants were in their infancy stage. Few dentists had the training to place dental implants and even fewer patients had heard about them or would even consider them as an option to replace hopeless or missing teeth. Today, approximately three million people already have dental implants and that number is growing by 500,000 a year! The first dental implant with some reasonable and reproducible success rate was the subperiosteal implant framework which became popular in the 1950's. When first introduced it was mainly recommended for patients who had lost all of their teeth. These patients were very uncomfortable wearing dentures due to their lack of stability and did not tolerate them well. Those implants were made of vitallium and placed underneath the gums sitting flush on the bone and anchored with small screws without actually being implanted into the jaw bone.

There were a number of problems with this type of implant system. Most significantly it was susceptible to failure due to the manner in which the implants were anchored, not to mention the invasive surgical procedure necessary to place them. It had a success rate of around 50% after

15 years, which is one of the reasons it is no longer used today. In 1966, Dr. Linkow presented the "blade implant" which was inserted directly into the bone by making a groove in the alveolar bone. One or more posts were attached to the fin-shaped plate, which anchored the restoration. The success rate for this type of implant was under 50%, and it too is no longer used today.

Professor Per-Ingvar Brånemark, a Swedish Orthopedic Surgeon, was the inventor and developer of modern era implant dentistry. While thirty years ago they were considered experimental nowadays his methods of design and placement are the basis of all current implants and the standard of care being used routinely worldwide. Since its introduction in 1982, there have been many changes in the design and surface texture of dental implants. Today with superior bone grafting techniques and materials, use of growth factors, sinus lifts, immediate loading, 3D imaging and specialized computer software, our ability to plan our cases has been elevated. We can improve the execution of the entire process and the final outcome. This has resulted in a success rate close to 98% which is higher than any other alternative treatment option for replacing missing teeth.

So what actually are dental implants? In simple terms, they are artificial roots inserted into the jaw bone and used to support individual crowns, or multiple crowns joined together as a fixed and splinted bridge for long spans of missing teeth. They can also support and stabilize full dentures, which can either be removable or permanently attached and non-removable. Current dental implants are made of titanium with specialized coatings. After surgical placement the implant attaches to the bone by undergoing a process known as osseointegration. Single tooth implant replacements normally have three components. The actual implant fixture which replaces the natural root of tooth, the abutment which attaches to the implant fixture and acts as a support for the third component of this complex, which is the crown. Special attachments can also serve as anchors for removable dentures making them more stable and retentive as well.

Today, dental implants have become the gold standard of care and are used extensively to replace even single teeth. Success rates vary but when properly placed by trained professionals the overall success rate is 97%- 98%. As an evolving science, dental insurance companies originally rarely paid benefits for dental implants, but over time most insurance company policies now allow coverage for dental implants and the restorative dentistry that use these implants as their foundation.

The benefits for dental implants are numerous and there are only a few patients who are not good candidates for receiving them. With the many advancements and techniques available such as supplementing a patient's own bone with surgical bone grafting techniques, patients who previously did not have adequate bone for dental implants can now get them. There are several benefits to dental implants over the use of fixed permanent bridges, as well as partial and full removable dentures. Here are some of them:

1. Most importantly, it's the next best thing to one's own healthy natural teeth. It's strong, durable, stable, esthetic and it functions and looks like your own teeth.
2. You can enjoy eating and speaking without being uncomfortable or worrying about your teeth moving around or even falling out. You can eat all the foods you ate before, unlike the restrictions one has with ordinary removable dentures.
3. They last for many years, often decades or even a lifetime, and are often a better longstanding solution for people who have lost their teeth from periodontal disease and dental decay. The implant teeth are not sensitive to cold, hot, pressure or chewing.
4. They protect the surrounding bone from gradual deterioration and may even promote bone growth.
5. You can eat your favorite foods naturally, and they do not decay. You can enjoy the taste of foods and not experience the diminished loss of taste commonly reported by denture wearers.
6. Implants avoid damaging adjacent natural teeth which previously had to be trimmed down to support a bridge or partial denture.
7. As a result of these advantages patients with implant retained dental work have greater self-esteem and are happier. Overall, dental implants and dental implant restorations have a long-term track record of being more predictable and reliable than some teeth that have undergone root canal therapy, fillings, crowns and both removable and fixed bridges.

By now you should have a basic understanding of what a dental implant is, and why it's almost always the best option for replace missing teeth. However, the stumbling block for many people then becomes, "Who do I go to? Can I trust the dentist to do what's best for me? What's the process? What are my options and can I afford it?" The public is bombarded by advertising on TV, radio, newspapers, and fliers for special promotions and "quick fixes". How does the average person know how to proceed? It's my hope that I can give you some insight and direction so that you will be confident in your choices and delighted with your decisions. What follows is my perspective from over 35 years as a practicing dentist.

I graduated from New York University in 1971 as the top senior in a class of 175 students. I was a dental intern at Booth Memorial Hospital in Flushing, NY (now known as the New York Hospital Center of Queens) where I remained on teaching staff for two years. I have been in private practice since 1973. I have had professional relationships with numerous Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons and Periodontists and have been replacing and restoring missing teeth with full mouth reconstructions and implant retained restorations for most of my career. I would like to make some suggestions about how one should proceed in finding the right dentist or team of dentists who can provide excellent dental care that will be successful for the long-term.

1. Be aware of advertising claims that suggest the office or doctor are "specialists" in dental implants. There are no recognized dental specialties such as "Dental Implant Dentist" or "Cosmetic Dentist". However, Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, Periodontists, and Prosthodontists are recognized specialists who go through advanced training in their specific

area of expertise. Being "Board Certified" represents another and higher level of recognition as a result of an examination and certification by CODA (Commission on Dental Accreditation).

2. Placing thousands of dental implants does not necessarily guarantee that the dentist is any more qualified than a dentist who places fewer implants, nor will the result necessarily be any better. Training, care, proper diagnostic images, the use of surgical stents and expertise of the dentist or dental team is the real key to success.

3. Value and quality, not cost is what's really important. Some offices advertise a lower fee for the actual "implant" but may add other charges for an abutment, crown, anesthesia, follow-up care, etc. to bring the total cost at or even above the "going rate" in your area. Also, you don't want to save money initially for what appears to be a bargain, only to have other problems arise, or even implant failures, incurring additional and unnecessary costs down the road. It might seem like a bargain, but remember the phrase buyer beware!

Understand the process. Placing a dental implant requires expertise and finesse. The longer I am in practice, the more I appreciate the intricacies of implant selection and placement. The slightest changes in implant position, angulation, size and design, depth to the gingival surface, and proximity to adjacent implants or natural teeth, may have a significant effect on the health, esthetics and longevity of the implant restoration. A surgeon may place a perfectly planned implant fixture that if restored improperly can be problematic or even result in failure. Careful planning, careful placement, and careful design by a diligent dentist or dental team is essential for optimum esthetics, function and long-term success.

Now for my advice regarding what I strongly believe is the best approach when considering dental implants:

STEP ONE: The single most important decision to make is in choosing the right dentist. He or she will be the one who will evaluate your needs, discuss your restorative options, and either treat you or refer you to the dentist or team of dentists to place and restore your missing teeth. So the question is, "How do I choose the right dentist?" The "ideal dentist" would be one who has all of the following attributes. He or she has been your dentist for years, and having had that role, has always demonstrated concern for you and your needs. Rarely if ever has there been a problem with the quality of his or her treatment. This dentist has been courteous and shown you respect; the fees have been fair and reasonable; he/she has been available for emergencies in a timely fashion; is liked and well respected by other patients, dentists, staff and other health care professionals. This dentist has had sufficient training and experience placing and/or restoring dental implants and handling difficult cases. They will be able to show you actual examples of their treatment, and can provide you with the names of other patients as a referral. A dentist with all these attributes would surely be a good dentist to choose! If you already have such a trusted dentist who has been treating you for a long time, but does not feel he or she can handle your particular situation, ask for a referral and trust his or her recommendations. Dentists know who in their area has the experience, the skills and the respect of their colleagues for consistent excellent results and patient satisfaction.

STEP TWO: Make sure your dentist discusses to your satisfaction and understanding, why he or she is recommending a particular treatment plan, what all your restorative options are, and the advantages and disadvantages of each option. This would include the consequences for either postponing treatment or not going ahead with the recommended treatment, insurance coverage (if any), fees involved, possible unexpected situations that might occur during treatment along with the corresponding fees, total cost of treatment, payment options and expectation of results. Do not be afraid to ask questions as it is your money, your teeth and your dental and medical health at stake. No question is a stupid question, and don't be afraid to ask the same question or probe deeper if you do not fully understand any of the explanations. The right dentist should take all the time necessary to satisfactorily answer your questions. I usually ask my patients to bring their husband, wife or someone in their family with them for the initial consultation. That's always a good idea, when possible, because when two people are present questions are less likely to be missed or answers not remembered, since it's not uncommon for one's mind to wander while the dentist is talking.

STEP THREE: Once you have full confidence in your choice of dentist or dentists and understand what your best treatment option is and why, the next important thing is to comply with your dentist's recommendations in a timely fashion. Anything that may prevent you from going ahead with treatment should be expressed to the dentist so it can be discussed and resolved. Whatever it is, your dentist is there to help you make the right decisions. If you do not express your concerns, your dentist cannot properly address them and suggest a solution.

STEP FOUR: Finally, don't let finances prevent you from receiving proper dental care. Remember, this treatment should last many years, perhaps a lifetime. Get your priorities in order. Don't be penny wise and pound foolish and look for the least expensive option or the least expensive dentist. For the most part, you've heard the expressions, "you get what you pay for", "if it's too good to be true, it probably is", and "price is what you pay, value is what you get." I've found those sayings all to be true and a guiding influence in my own life. Look into your insurance benefits (if any), consider 3rd party payment plans such as CareCredit and the CitiHealthcard which your dentist might offer as an interest free six month to one year repayment plan. For those really expensive cases, consider a home equity line of credit which is usually the least expensive type of loan and generally a tax deduction. Discuss these options with your own accountant as each situation is different. Many dentists offer a discount if the entire bill is paid in advance. And keep in mind, from start to finish, the treatment time can be six months to over a year, so payments can be spread out over time, making them easier to manage.

Good dentistry lasts. It is an investment in both your dental health and medical health, as well as your overall well-being and happiness. Choose wisely and I'm sure you will be much happier.

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