

Dental implants have various advantages

ASK THE DENTIST



DR. DAVID BANDA

Question: My 18-year-old daughter never formed an adult upper tooth near the front. Her orthodontist made her a plastic replacement tooth, attached to her retainer, which she has worn for the last couple of years. But now he says it's time to get a permanent replacement. Our family dentist suggested an implant or a bridge, but we are confused with our options. What do you suggest? I have heard of bridges, but I don't know anything about implants. Could you please tell us more?

Answer: Implants are one of the most significant advancements ever made in dentistry. They have provided many people with benefits like increased confidence, improved chewing capability, improved cosmetics and more confidence. Of all the dental procedures I perform in my office, implants have created the most significant improvement in a patient's well-being.

Implants are artificial tooth root replacements, more specifically they are metal pegs placed under the gums in an area where there is no tooth.

There are several situations where implants are beneficial. Let's say that a person experiences trauma to the mouth and a front tooth is knocked out, or in your daughter's situation, an adult front tooth is never formed. In order to replace this tooth so your daughter can speak and smile normally, we must examine several options.

First, she can wear a removable appliance with the prosthet-

ic replacement tooth in the position of the missing tooth. This works for some people, but others wish they could have teeth that are a permanent part of their mouth. In order to have fixed permanent teeth that do not come out, there are two options: fixed bridge work or implant supported teeth.

A bridge, as its name implies, is something that "bridges the gap" between two teeth on either side of a space where a tooth is missing. This accomplished by grinding down one or more teeth on either side of the space and then making a bridge, which is a collection of crowns (same as caps) connected together from the first ground-down tooth across the space to the last ground-down tooth. This option is great if teeth on either side of the space need to be ground down anyway for crowns, due to existing breakage or the presence of large worn out fillings.

But what if a person, like your daughter, is missing an upper front tooth and nothing is wrong with the teeth on either side of the space? The most common situation that takes place in my office sounds very much like your daughter's dilemma - a teenager who never formed an upper lateral incisor (the small tooth just either side of the two middle upper front teeth). The vast majority of these teens have little or no decay or fillings.

To perform a bridge procedure on a person desiring permanent replacement of the space with a tooth, we would have to grind down the teeth on either side of the space to make the bridge. As a patient with perfectly sound, healthy teeth on either side of the missing tooth, your daughter may not want to have her teeth ground down. Another drawback of grinding down healthy teeth is

that the nerves in these teeth are often quite large, especially in someone your daughter's age. These nerves often respond poorly to the grinding away of all of the protective enamel because the large nerves inside these young teeth are closer to the tooth's surface.

Although your daughter would not feel the drilling because of the anesthetic, the nerves may be quite sensitive. Furthermore, it's not unheard of for these teeth to require root canal therapy after undergoing the trauma from drilling. I would be hard pressed to try to convince you, or your daughter with beautiful teeth, that the best plan of action to replace the missing tooth would be to drill down

healthy teeth on either side of the space. And risk the possibility of root canals or future decay when there are alternative plans that do not involve drilling down teeth and do not involve a removable appliance.

With an implant procedure, your daughter can have a permanent replacement tooth for the space without grinding down any other teeth. Here is how this works:

A dental implant, made of titanium metal, is placed under the gums in an area where we wish we had a tooth. This will act like a root. The person placing the implant must be highly trained and experienced in this procedure because it's very exciting. Your family dentist may send your daughter to another office

for this phase of the implant therapy.

Implants are most frequently placed by general dentists, such as myself, who have had additional training in both the surgical and prosthetic phases of implant therapy, or by oral surgeons or periodontists. Regardless of who places the implant, care must be taken to plan the tooth or teeth that go on the implant before placing the implant.

With most implant systems, a resting period will occur while we wait for the jawbone to bond to the implant. This process is called "osseointegration." During this time your daughter goes about her business as usual with nothing visible in this area as the gums cover the implant during healing. She will also wear a temporary tooth to hide the space.

After the proper time has elapsed and the implant and bone are bonded together, the next phase of the therapy can begin. This is where a metal peg is fastened to the implant; this peg can look very much like a natural tooth would look if it was ground down for a crown. Next, the restorative dentist (usually your family dentist) fits the tooth for an implant crown and the procedure is complete.

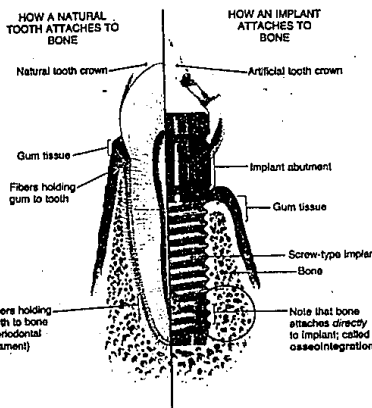
There are several advantages to this implant solution over the fixed bridge we mentioned earlier. First, no teeth were drilled to place the implant. Second, an implant can never decay! Fixed bridge work can fail for a variety of reasons, the most common being decay. Over 37 percent of bridges on natural teeth that fail do so due to decay, often requiring the replacement of a multiple tooth bridge. Compare this with an implant crown which exhibits a success rate of well

over 90 percent.

Even if an implant crown did require replacement - due to trauma for example - only the one tooth would need to be replaced and that is much less expensive than replacing an existing bridge. One other advantage of implants over bridge work is ease in home care. A single implant crown can be brushed and flossed just like a regular tooth, whereas a bridge requires the use of a "floss threader" that threads the floss through its opening to clean under the bridge. Because it's inconvenient to keep bridges flossed properly, people often neglect this necessary part of their home care and often get inflamed, red and bleeding diseased gums, or decay that necessitates multiple visits in the dental office to get the gums healthy and replace the bridge.

Implants are not for everyone, however. Some people have medical conditions or dental problems that make implants inappropriate. But for the most part, an implant would be the first alternative I'd consider in your daughter's case. Ask your family dentist for more information.

(Dr. David Banda is a general dentist in Bloomfield Hills. He graduated from the University of Michigan and is a member of the American Dental Association, the Michigan Dental Association and the Oakland County Dental Society. Send questions or comments for Dr. Banda in care of staff writer Chris Mayer at: The Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Additional information can be obtained on the Internet, at www.theimplantdentist.com, via e-mail at drbanda@flash.net or by fax at 248-647-7688.)



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