

Are Dental Implants Better Than Real Teeth?

Is it possible that something man-made is better than the real thing? In the case of dental implants, the answer is actually in many ways- yes.

A dental implant is basically a titanium artificial tooth root. It functions as an anchor for a cap, bridge, or denture. Titanium is the strong, biocompatible metal that artificial knees and hips are made from. Dental implants have been in increasing use for the last 20 years. They are now both very common and state of the art care around the world for replacing missing teeth.

Obviously, I am not suggesting replacing good, functional teeth with implants. But when a tooth has a poor prognosis or if it requires extensive treatment to save it, an implant needs to be considered as one (often the best) option.

So in what ways are dental implants better than real teeth. They don't decay. They are resistant to gum and bone disease (periodontitis). They help keep the surrounding bone from resorbing. And finally, they are usually "lifetime" restorations. We'll look at each of these.

Tooth decay is the most common reason for a tooth to need a major overhaul, such as a needing a root canal, build-up, and cap. Most teeth (80-90%) in this situation can be successfully treated. The only problem is that the root of the tooth, underneath the gum but above the bone) is still subject to decay in future years. This is especially true in people who have decay on a lot of teeth due to poor enamel, or high sugar diet, or dry mouth, or particularly harmful bacteria in the mouth, or any combination of these. Titanium does not decay.

The most common cause of people losing all their teeth is actually periodontitis (gum and bone disease). There are excellent ways of controlling periodontitis, but many times it is severe before the person even knows they have a problem. Dental implants are not totally immune, but they are much more resistant to this type of infection than are natural teeth. So if a patient has lost one, or all their natural teeth to periodontitis, implants are still a great option.

Dental implants "maintain" the bone around them. When a tooth is lost, approximately 60% of the surrounding bone is resorbed (it just goes away) over the first 2 years and then it continues more slowly forever. Bone grafting the tooth socket greatly reduces resorption, but an implant prevents it all together. Bone is "use it or lose it" and an implant, like a healthy tooth root, uses it appropriately.

Dental implants usually last a lifetime. About 90% of implants successfully integrate into the bone. Those that don't will be removed within the first year, usually within the first few weeks. Once integrated, for the reasons mentioned above, they are usually there for life. This is especially important late in life when being able to eat well is even more critical, and good hygiene at home (or in the nursing home) are often lacking.

Dr. David Ward has practiced comprehensive family dentistry in Big Spring since 1988. Many of the subjects in this article are discussed in more detail in previous Herald articles that are all available on his website www.DavidWardDDS.com.