

## It's Only a Tooth...Right?

It's only a tooth...right? I hear that question in my office occasionally. You may have asked me or another dentist the same question if a tooth has big problems.

First, let me say that losing a tooth is not the end of the world. It is not fatal to lose a tooth. In fact, if the tooth is badly infected, cracked, or broken down by decay, extraction may be the best alternative.

That being said, infected teeth can often be saved with root canals or periodontal (gum and bone) therapy and badly broken or decayed teeth can often be saved with crowns (caps). It also usually costs less to save a tooth than replace it, so always consider saving.

If we can't save a tooth, chewing ability, or cosmetics, or both will suffer. As I have noted in previous articles, when a tooth is removed the other teeth start shifting, the jaw bone starts shrinking, and the diet starts favoring softer, less healthy foods. Also, having an empty spot when one smiles, even toward the back, makes other people think that the person can't afford to fix the problem. Studies show that smile is one of the main components of the all important first impression.

The best tooth replacement is almost always a Dental Implant. An implant is a titanium cylinder placed surgically into the jawbone, and it functions like a tooth root. The implant actually preserves the jawbone from shrinkage, and allows us to restore the tooth with an abutment and crown attached to the implant. Another fantastic thing about implants is that they are resistant to gum disease and immune to decay!

Before we had implants, the best tooth replacement was a Bridge, technically called "fixed partial denture". A bridge can replace one or several teeth in an area. It is usually attached to teeth on each side of the open area by means of crowns (called bridge retainers in this case). A bridge looks and chews just like natural teeth, however it does not maintain the bone the way implants do. Reasonably healthy teeth on each side of the missing area are needed for these beautiful restorations.

If many teeth are missing, if the health of the other teeth is questionable, or if the patient has limited finances, then a Partial or "removable partial denture" may need to be considered. A partial comes in and out and costs much less than the other options. While a partial can be reasonably cosmetic, the function and cosmetics of a partial are not nearly as good as with the implants or bridges. That being said, the function with a partial is usually much better than with a full denture, especially a lower denture.

Finally, if you are to the point of needing dentures, invest in quality. Consider that your ability to smile, talk, and chew are all directly related to your dentures. This is no time to be a penny pincher. Reline them every 3-5 years to keep them fitting well and consider implants or mini-implants to make them much more stable.