

Three Tooth Replacement Options

1. Implants

2. Fixed Bridges

3. Removable Bridges

Because looking good and feeling good are important to us all, it is wise to maintain a healthy and attractive smile throughout life. Adults of all ages can benefit from smile-improving dental options.

If you're missing one or more teeth, you may be particularly aware of their importance to your appearance and dental health. All your teeth work together to help you chew, speak, and smile. When teeth are missing, it is difficult to do these things. Even the loss of a back tooth may cause your mouth to shift and your face to look older. Fortunately, missing teeth can be replaced, and they should be.

Choosing the correct treatment is very important. Following are three options your dentist may suggest, depending on your needs and the best way to meet them.

Implants

A **dental implant** is much like a natural tooth, which has a root in your jawbone, topped by a crown that you can see. When you need an implant, your dentist inserts a metal post beneath your gum and into the bone. It fuses to the bone in your jaw and acts like the root of a tooth. Then your dentist makes a replacement crown on the metal post, designed to blend in with the way your own teeth look and feel. Dental implants also can be used to anchor dentures.

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. Further, patients either must have adequate Bone to support the implant, or be good candidates for surgery to build up the area needing the implant. Patients also should be committed to very thorough oral hygiene every day, and regular dental visits. If you are considering implants, a full evaluation by your dentist will help determine if you would be a good candidate.

What Is Involved In Placing Implants?

First, surgery is performed to place the implant. Up to six months may be required for the bone to grow around the implant to firmly hold it in place. In certain cases, dentists can use techniques that may allow immediate use of the implant. 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.

After healing, the next step is begun. The replacement tooth is made and fitted to the post portion of the implant. Because several fittings may be required, this step can take one month or longer to complete.

Implant surgery can be done either in a dental office as an outpatient procedure or in a hospital, depending upon a number of factors. A local or general anesthetic may be used. Usually pain medications and, when necessary, antibiotics are prescribed. Your dentist will give you instructions on diet and oral hygiene.

Dental implants can provide replacement teeth that look natural and feel secure, and also can be used to support complete or partial dentures. It is possible to stabilize dentures and eliminate the need to remove them each day.

Advantages of implants:

- An implant is most similar to a natural tooth
- Adjacent teeth do not have to be involved in the placement procedure
- Implants may decrease or help prevent shrinkage of the jawbone from tooth loss

Disadvantages:

- Implants are not intended for everyone
- Implant placement takes longer and may require more dental visits than alternative procedures

General dentists usually determine if an implant is appropriate for you, but sometimes they may refer you to a dental specialist for additional care. Following are some of the dental specialist who may be called upon, and brief descriptions of their areas of expertise:

- prosthodontist – restoration and replacement of teeth
- oral and maxillofacial surgeon – dental surgery

- periodontist – periodontal (gum) disease

Fixed Bridges

Another alternative is a fixed bridge (sometimes called a fixed partial denture) This is a restoration that replaces or spans the space where one or more teeth have been lost. A **fixed bridge** is bonded or cemented into place – only a dentist can remove it.

Your appearance, dental health and the proper functioning of your mouth all are important reasons for wearing a fixed bridge. It helps maintain the natural shape of your face and may help support your lips and cheeks.

If you need an extensive fixed bridge procedure, your dentist may refer you to a prosthodontist.

How a Fixed Bridge Is Attached

A fixed bridge is commonly cemented or bonded to the natural teeth next to the space left by the missing teeth. An artificial tooth (called a pontic) replaces the lost natural tooth, and restores its function. A pontic is attached to a crown (restoration that covers a tooth). Crowns, which are cemented on adjacent prepared teeth, serve as retainers that support the fixed bridge.

Different Types of Fixed Bridges

A fixed bridge can be attached to your natural teeth. Different types of artificial teeth may be used in fixed bridges. These include gold, porcelain fused to metal, and all-porcelain.

In some instance, a resin-bonded fixed bridge (sometimes called a “Maryland Bridge”) can be used to replace one or more missing teeth. Because it is attached by a special procedure called bonding, it doesn’t require the use of crowns or extensive tooth preparation. Your dentist can determine whether this treatment method is appropriate for you.

Advantages of fixed bridges:

- Look, feel and function like natural teeth
- No need to remove from mouth for cleaning

Disadvantages:

- Likely to be more expensive than removable bridges
- Affects the adjoining teeth

Removable Bridges

As its name describes, a **removable bridge** (sometimes called a removable partial denture) readily can be taken out of the mouth for cleaning. Although removable bridges generally are less expensive, fixed bridges, when indicated, may feel more stable and comfortable.

Depending on your situation, however, a removable bridge may be for you. Removable bridges usually have replacement teeth attached to gum-colored plastic bases connected by metal framework. They may attach to your natural teeth with metal clasps or devices called precision attachments. A clasp less removable bridge, when indicated, may provide better support and esthetics. Crowns on your natural teeth may improve the way a removable bridge fits your mouth. Ask your dentist which type is right for you.

Growing Accustomed To a Removable Bridge

Inserting and removing the new removable bridge takes some practice. It may feel awkward for the first few weeks. However, your mouth eventually should become accustomed to it. The bridge should fit into place with relative ease.

Your dentist can explain how long the removable bridge should be worn and when it should be removed. At the start, you may be asked to wear it for the first 24 hours. While this may temporarily cause discomfort, it is the quickest way to identify any parts requiring adjustment. If the bridge puts too much pressure on one area, that spot will become sore. Your dentist can adjust the bridge to fit more comfortably. Once adjusted, your dentist may recommend that you remove the bridge before going to sleep and replace it when you awaken.

Once your missing teeth are replaced, eating should be a much more pleasant experience. Since missing teeth can make it difficult to speak clearly, wearing a removable bridge can help with that, too.

Over time, as you age and your mouth changes, your removable bridge may no longer fit well. It also could break, crack or chip, or one of the teeth could loosen. In many instances, dentists can make the necessary adjustment or repairs, often on the same day. But complicated repairs may take longer.

If you need extensive dental reconstruction, including a removable bridge, your dentist will provide the treatment or refer you to a prosthodontist.

Advantages of a removable bridge over a fixed bridge

- Usually easier to repair
- Usually less expensive

Disadvantages

- Removable bridges can be less stable than alternative choices
- They can break or be lost
- Some people find removable bridges uncomfortable
- Some people are embarrassed to take out their teeth at night and for cleaning

Explore All Your Options

How best to replace missing teeth is an important decision. Your dentist can answer your questions and help you decide which option will work best for you.