

Missing Teeth

Losing a tooth is often a traumatic event. The desire to extract a tooth usually is a response to “get rid of the pain”. There are many reasons why a tooth may need to be extracted. These reasons may involve caries, fractured teeth or loose teeth from periodontal or gum disease. When it is possible to save a tooth one should always explore that option and avoid extracting the tooth just to get rid of the pain. Treatment to save a tooth may take some time but pain control can be achieved and the tooth saved. Once a tooth is extracted it cannot be put back and there are detrimental effects to your long term oral health and replacing the missing tooth can be involved and costly.

Once a tooth is missing it is imperative to replace the missing tooth. When a tooth is missing teeth next to the space and below the space can drift into the space. This can cause teeth to become misaligned and cause the occlusion or bite to become problematic or “crooked”. Spaces created by the drifting teeth can open contacts between other teeth causing food to get trapped between teeth. These areas are problematic to keep clean and caries or gum disease could result. Missing teeth can cause people to become self conscious about their smile. Missing teeth are synonymous with old age and can make you look older. As soon as a tooth is lost the supporting bone in the jaw begins to dissolve through a process called resorption. The longer a tooth is missing, the greater the bone loss. Over time, resorption of the jawbone has a considerable effect on quality of life and on the possibility of replacing the missing teeth. As more teeth are lost it does become more difficult to eat and chew food. Over time as more and more of the jaw bone resorbs it becomes very difficult to place any kind dental restoration.

How missing teeth are replaced depends on the diagnosis, treatment plan, and discussion between you and your dentist following a complete exam. Missing teeth can be replaced with several options. Replacement options include dental implants, fixed bridges, partial dentures, and full dentures.

Dental implants are the preferred choice for replacing missing teeth. Ideally placed implants are as close as we can get to natural teeth as possible. Dental implants not only replace the entire missing tooth but they also preserve the supporting bone and do not require that adjacent teeth be prepared for support. Although more expensive initially they are more cost effective in the long run since replacement usually involved only one crown instead of the multiple units involved in a bridge and more importantly they can preserve your bone.

A bridge is another option which is like having three crowns. The teeth on either side of the missing tooth are prepared for crowns. The laboratory then makes the crowns and fastens a false tooth between the two crowns. The advantages of a bridge are that it is fixed, stable, and feels like your own teeth. In most cases it can be made to look just like you never had a tooth missing. The disadvantage is that you have to prepare two teeth besides the one that was extracted and these teeth may otherwise be perfectly sound with nothing wrong.

Something removable can be used to replace a missing tooth. This can be anything from a budget “dental flipper” which is a piece of plastic with a false tooth attached to a more sturdy metal and acrylic removable partial denture. The advantages of a removable partial denture appliance are that it is a more economical way to replace missing teeth than a fixed bridge and multiple teeth can be replaced with one appliance. If the span of missing teeth is three or more, or if there are not solid teeth on both sides of the missing teeth, a fixed bridge may not work and a removable partial or implant will be required. The disadvantages are that it may not be as esthetic as a bridge and metal clasps will be required to retain the removable partial which may be visible. There may be some discomfort with wearing a removable appliance in your mouth, and it is not as stable as a bridge. Dentures are used when all teeth are missing and can be used in combination with implants for stability and bone preservation.

Teeth should be replaced as soon as they are lost. This will help you maintain your oral health by preventing bone loss, reducing movement of surrounding teeth and avoiding problems which could lead to decay and gum disease. Teeth in addition to providing the ability to chew are necessary for the health of the gum and jaw tissues as well, and a prolonged absence of a tooth will severely limit the possibilities for restorations in the future. Missing teeth may also affect your confidence and well-being.

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