

Save the Tooth, or Place the Implant?

It may be the biggest debate in dentistry... and every patient should know both sides of the issue.

The question is: if you have a severely decayed tooth, should you aggressively try to save it, or should you replace it with a dental implant?

First, a definition of a “severely decayed” tooth: this is not a tooth that simply needs a filling or even a root canal. In this specific situation, the decay is so severe that a root canal is just the beginning of the treatment you’ll need to save the tooth.

In addition to a root canal, your dentist will need to refer you to a periodontist to perform gum surgery called crown lengthening, after which your dentist will place a post and core to rebuild the tooth and a crown to protect the tooth from further breakage. The result may save your tooth, but at the end of this treatment sequence, you have a tooth that has been weakened, with less root support in the bone, and still is susceptible to dental decay. In fact, the dental literature tells us that crowns develop additional decay after 10 years in the mouth, on average. The whole process then starts all over again.

Disadvantages to saving a tooth

In this scenario, there are many disadvantages to saving that natural tooth. First, the gum surgery will likely affect the supporting jaw structure of adjacent, uninvolved teeth. And second, your smile may be jeopardized, because the gum surgery you need to allow crown placement will create asymmetry to your gum line. In cosmetic dentistry, the symmetry and natural appearance of the gumline is equally as important as the appearance of the teeth.

Getting a dental implant to replace the tooth avoids many of these problems. There is no need for a root canal or gum surgery. Adjacent

teeth are left unaffected, and the gumline is left in a condition that is symmetrical and cosmetically pleasing. In addition, dental implants do not suffer from the problems that teeth do. They will never require a root canal, they don’t fracture, and they will never get decay. In fact, we are finding that dental implants become lifetime restorations.

Dental implants mimic natural teeth

Perhaps most important is that an implant will look completely natural. New improvements in dental implants and placement procedures ensure that your smile will look just as beautiful as ever. The greatest improvement is that the implant tooth and abutment can be made entirely out of porcelain. This will allow your new tooth to reflect and transmit light, mimicking a natural tooth.

The cost? It tends to be about the same whether you save the decayed tooth or replace it with a dental implant.

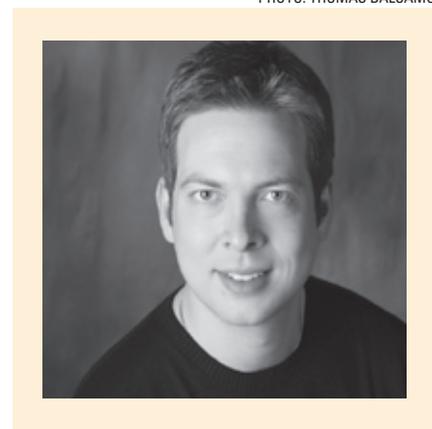
The other side of the issue

The main argument against dental implant tooth replacement is that, in general, it’s better for patients to retain their natural teeth. There is also a small chance that the dental implant will not heal into the jaw, although implants are known to be successful over 95 percent of the time. Finally, some dentists may argue that if you try to preserve a natural tooth, you still have the option of an implant down the road.

These are compelling arguments. But implants have less long-term maintenance issues compared to teeth. This equates to less long-term cost and inconvenience, while also looking more natural without disturbing the cosmetics of the smile.

This debate won’t end soon. But before you make your choice, make sure your dentist gives you both sides of the story. 

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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