

What is the Clear Choice?

YOU HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT you need to have a dental implant because a tooth is broken and is not savable. Or, maybe your denture is uncomfortable or you don't like the appearance of the metal hooks. Dental implants have allowed treatment alternatives other than grinding away good teeth for bridges or having to deal with false teeth that must be taken out to keep clean. Dental implants, however, add new complexities and potential complications to the overall treatment sequence. It is important to choose the right implant team to minimize the chance of having a poor outcome.

The dental implant itself can be thought of as a tooth "root" replacement. It does not include the part of the tooth that is seen. Therefore, the treatment sequence is usually done in two phases. The first phase is a surgical phase when the dental implant is placed into the jawbone. The implant is then allowed to heal for a period of time. The second phase is the restorative phase when the replacement tooth is secured to the top of the dental implant.

In the field of dentistry, there are groups of specialists that are dentists who have advanced training in specific dental issues:

- Periodontists with periodontal disease and cosmetic gum issues
- Prosthodontists with crowns and dentures
- Endodontists with root canals
- Orthodontists with braces
- Pediatric dentists with children's dentistry
- Oral surgeons with tooth removal and surgical related issues

There is no recognized specialty limited to dental implants, which means this procedure is being done by anyone who wants to do them. The current trend, however, is that the surgical phase of implant dentistry is performed by periodontists, oral surgeons, or general dentists, while the restorative phase is handled by prosthodontists or general dentists. A general dentist is able to handle basic cases. When complex issues are present such

as the need to bone graft or gum graft, larger reconstructions, or highly cosmetic areas, a periodontist or oral surgeon and a prosthodontist best handle the implant procedures.

The most important step to ensure a successful dental implant is selecting the right implant surgeon and restorative dentist. Recently, dental implant "supercenters" are advertising and gaining exposure. When considering an implant center that advertises, it is important to keep in mind that the advertising is intended to sell their method of implant treatment, not to educate patients about their treatment options. Another important consideration is whether the doctors at the implant center are evaluating your overall dental needs, as your restorative dentist would, rather than focusing strictly on implant treatment. For example, if you need periodontal treatment and the implant center does not have a periodontist, will they refer you to a local periodontist for treatment prior to placing implants? It is also essential to determine whether the implant center will be able to provide ongoing evaluation and maintenance, or whether they simply provide implant treatment and expect the patients to seek continuing care elsewhere.

As the field of implant dentistry evolves and grows larger and more clinicians are becoming involved, it is important to make sure that the best treatment is always afforded to patients. In 1997, the Institute For Dental Implant Awareness (IDIA) was founded. According to the Web site, www.idia.org, IDIA is "a nonprofit corporation founded to provide independent, authoritative, and objective information on the benefits of dental implants as an alternative treatment option for tooth replacement." In an effort to protect patients from clinicians taking abbreviated implant courses, IDIA developed new training guidelines to meet the legal standard of care for basic implant placement, which is outlined on the Web site. In general, the abbreviated "weekend" course is inadequate to

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train the complexities of dental implant treatment. IDIA also has an effective consumer Web site at www.missingteeth.org, which helps make implant dentistry less confusing and gives advice on how to select the right implant dentist.

There is no better way to replace missing teeth than with dental implants. Be an educated patient and make good choices regarding your treatment. Because the choice may not be clear, ask your dentist questions, research the topic, and never be afraid to get a second opinion. 