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Dental Implants: Success rates, Risks and Complications

Dental implants provide patients with an added option for replacing missing teeth. It allows the replacement of a missing tooth without preparation of the adjacent teeth. Although implant treatment is highly successful, as with any other form of treatment, there is always a chance of failure. A vast number of studies have examined the success of implants with typical success rates ranging around 95% in the lower jaw and 85% in the upper jaw. Compared to other forms of treatment, they offer a very good prognosis.

As each person is different, each outcome is different. Factors that can contribute to increased failure rate include the following:

1. Smoking.
2. Poor oral hygiene.
3. Not presenting for follow up care.
4. Uncontrolled grinding of teeth.
5. Specific illnesses or previous radiation therapy treatments.
6. Unrealistic expectations.

The final point is important. It is crucial that you are aware of the limitations of implant treatment. Implants can replace missing teeth, but they are an *artificial* replacement. This is exemplified in the esthetic areas of the mouth where a smile will expose the junction of the tooth and gums. Achieving a normal look of gums around an implant is difficult. Although results can be quite good with new techniques and materials, it is unrealistic to promise that an implant replaced tooth will look exactly like the natural one. How a final replaced tooth looks is mostly dependent on what the surrounding gum tissue looks like. It is impossible to predict exactly the healing response of the bone and gum tissue. If tooth loss is associated with bone loss of the underlying jaw, as with an injury or long term tooth loss results are less predictable. Often a bone graft is required if there is insufficient support for the implant and gums.

Prior to the surgery to place the implant, your dentist will have discussed treatment options with you and the expected results. Even with the best diagnostics, in rare situations it may be found that the implant cannot be placed as planned. This means that the surgery would then have to be stopped. This is of little consequence other than a small incision that heals rapidly.

In some cases additional treatment may be required to achieve best results. For instance, if the bone shape is insufficient, a bone graft may be used and the time of implant placement. Or, if the bone loss is great, a graft may be placed prior to the implant surgery. If the soft tissue around the implant site is not ideal, a gum tissue graft may be required either at the time of implant placement or at a later date. Even after the final prosthetics have been delivered, gum tissue alterations may be required. These procedures would be required to give you long term service from your implants. These treatments would be in addition to your estimated implant surgery.

If you are a smoker, your dentist may want to delay the surgery until after you have started on a stop smoking program and have shown some success. Smoking greatly increases the chance of infection and delays wound healing which can lead to the most common complication after surgery, wound opening. Smoking also decreases the effectiveness of your immune system to fight gum disease in your mouth. The success of implants is greatly decreased in a patient who smokes.

It is essential the implant site be kept free of plaque. If oral hygiene is poor the implant will have the same fate as a tooth that is not kept clean. Although an implant cannot get a cavity, it can still suffer from gum and bone loss around it due to plaque. This can result in loss of the implant. Oral hygiene issues can be helped by making sure follow up appointments are attended to allow professional examination and cleaning.

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People who clench or grind their teeth at night can exert very high forces on their teeth. As much as five times the normal hard bite. Since implants are fused to the bone in your jaw, and do not move as do natural teeth, they do not tolerate abnormally high bite forces. In fact, people with excessive grinding or clenching habits are not candidates for implants. Your dentist may suggest a bite guard to protect your investment.

It is very important that you fill out your medical history carefully. Some conditions prohibit implant surgery. For your safety and to increase the probability of success of your implants, please do not leave out any information.

As with any surgery there are always risks and possible complications. The chance of complications is very small. They include:

1. Infection
2. Damage to nerves
3. Damage to sinuses
4. Post operative complications

Prior to placing the implants, you will have undergone x-rays to evaluate the position of certain structures in your jaw bones. These include the main nerve in your lower jaw and the sinuses in your upper jaw. It is important to avoid damaging these structures during the surgery. If the nerve in the lower jaw is damaged during surgery this could result in temporary or permanent loss or alteration of sensation to your lower lip and teeth on that side. Several x-rays will be taken during placement to ensure a safe distance from the nerve to the implant. However, even with the most care and attention, in very rare instances, nerve damage can result.

When implants are placed in the upper jaw in the back of your mouth the sinuses must be avoided or altered. If a sinus is entered additional treatments may be required. These may include delaying placement of the implant and/or partially filling the sinus with grafting material.

After an implant has been placed there should be mild discomfort that is easily controlled by pain medication prescribed to you. If pain persists or is severe, an infection may be developing. Often, infections are treated successfully by antibiotics. Rarely, an implant has to be removed. It is important to complete all medications given to you.

In cases where the incision to place the implants is large and in weak tissue, the stitches can fall out prematurely. If this happens the consequences are not severe. If care is taken to keep the site clean and away from any force by chewing the site usually heals normally. Your dentist should be alerted if this happens. Mild swelling and bruising are sometimes experienced after implant placement and are self limiting.

Finally, once the implant has successfully integrated into the jaw bone, there can be complications with the restoration. The crown, bridge or denture bar are held onto the implant by a screw. This screw can become loose or fracture. The cement that holds a crown on an implant can also fail resulting in the crown coming off. These problems are usually dealt with easily and repaired. In extremely rare instances, the implant itself can fracture and may necessitate its removal.

Although this information sheet lists many possible complications and risks, remember, implant treatment is highly successful, one of the most successful in dentistry. Complications are infrequent.

If you have any questions about success rates or risks and complications of implant surgery, ask your dentist for clarification. Prior to proceeding you should feel comfortable with your choice of treatment.