

Mind the Gap

IMPLANTS ARE BECOMING STANDARD CARE

By K.H. Queen

A gap-toothed smile is charming on a 7-year old. Not so much for an adult. But if you're missing a tooth or teeth, you have several options to restore your smile, says dentist Dr. Lisa Marie Samaha of Port Warwick Dental Arts in Newport News.

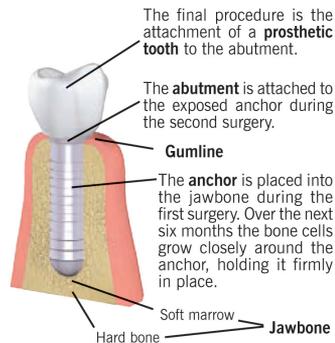
Those options are:

*A removable appliance, also known as a partial denture. That's the least expensive but also in most cases the least desirable, Samaha says.

*A bridge. Teeth on either side of the gap are reduced. The bridge fits over the supporting teeth, covering the gap. A bridge is sometimes, but not always, less expensive than an implant, Samaha says. In some cases, a bridge costs more than an implant.

*An implant, in which a titanium metal post is later covered by a crown. "If you are missing a tooth, you should be aware that an implant is the preferred option to a bridge in most cases," Samaha says. "It feels and functions like your own tooth. It requires no special method of cleaning, brushing or flossing. Implants are quickly becoming standard care as opposed to a bridge."

The success rate for implants is high: 98 percent for lower implants and 91 percent for upper implants, according to the University of Iowa College of Dentistry.



Unlike a removable denture that rests on the gum line or a bridge using adjacent teeth as anchors, dental implants are surgically placed in the jaw. A titanium metal rod is fused with the jawbone and then the crown is placed on top, according to the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. Dental implants never slip and don't make embarrassing noises that alert the world to your false tooth. Because the implant is fused with the jawbone, bone loss is generally not a problem, the association says.

It is vital that any candidate for an implant be totally committed to a meticulous regimen of oral hygiene as well as preventative maintenance as prescribed by the dentist, Samaha notes.

Advances in dental technology have reduced healing time after getting the titanium rod placed from months to weeks. In fact, if you're getting implants, it's possible but not typically recommended to get the crown placed the same day as the titanium rod, Samaha says. "Most people are not good candidates," she cautions.

A crown is a long-lasting



Implant-Supported Bridge



Implants



Implants



Implant/Veneers

artificial cover for a tooth. It can be made of gold or other metals, porcelain or ceramic or a combination of metal and ceramic. A ceramic or porcelain crown can be made to resemble a perfectly natural tooth, Samaha says.

If you're getting a crown on an existing tooth (not an implant), you may be able to skip the inconvenience of a temporary crown and proceed straight to a permanent crown, thanks to computer-aided design technology. So instead of a couple visits to the dentist over two to three weeks and the hassle of dealing with a temporary crown that can pop out, you can get your new crown in as little as a one-hour visit, Samaha says.

The technology that makes

it possible is called CEREC 3-D for Chairside Economical Restoration of Esthetic Ceramics. Samaha and her team take a pin-sharp optical impression of the tooth. Then, Samaha or her design expert digitally designs the crown in as little as 10 minutes. No need for second visits or extra numbing shots.

Tooth-colored CEREC crowns can restore 118 percent of the tooth's natural strength, Samaha says. They're plaque-resistant too, she says.

As for your smile, porcelain reflects light the same way teeth do—resulting in a normal smile, she says. Or a better than normal smile if you've filled in a gap.