

Costly, yes, but Dental Implants may be better

The alternatives to dentures can lead to more healthful eating, especially for seniors

An article by William Hathaway *Hartford Courant*

People with dental implants seem to eat better, be healthier and enjoy live more than people who have a mouth filled with dentures. Even people with dentures eat more healthful meals if they have just two implants, said R. Jocelyne S. Feine, professor of dentistry at McGill University in Montreal, who has studied the health benefits and costs of dental implants.

“Their reactions are phenomenal”, Feine said. “It makes such a difference in their lives”.

Although technology is making implants easier to perform and the crowns that they support better looking, their high costs keeps them from the people who might benefit the most-the poor elderly on fixed incomes, Feine said.

Implants – titanium screws inserted in the jaw to provide secure support for dental crowns-should become the standard of care in the United States and Canada, she says.

It's an uphill fight.

Most insurance policies will not pay for dental implants. Medicare also does not cover any dental costs. That means patients must pay out of pocket. Although the prices of dental implants and crowns vary greatly from region to region and by procedure, they aren't inexpensive anywhere.

In some areas of the country, a single rudimentary implant and crown can run as low as \$1,500. In other markets, the cost can be \$5,000 or more per tooth for more complicated procedures. Those costs do not include periodontal work or home grafts that sometimes are needed before an implant.

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Written by Dr Andre Menard dds

The high costs of implants drive patients to seek other options. If they lose a tooth, a few patients don't replace it. But adjacent teeth can drift into the gap on the gum, which can lead to other dental problems.

Sometimes, insurance will partially cover the costs of a fixed bridge-in which crowns replace the teeth on each side of the missing tooth, and a replacement tooth is suspended between the two crowns. Bridges are slightly less expensive than implants, although dentists say they are less desirable because they often need to be repaired.

"There are some people without dental plans who say they can't afford a dental restoration and simply find somebody to take all their teeth out" said Dr. Thomas Taylor, head of the department of oral rehabilitation biomaterials and skeletal development at the University of Connecticut Health Center. "It happens all the time."

Dentures may be the least expensive option, but they fall far short of matching the chewing efficiency of natural teeth or implants, Taylor said.

"There are very good studies that show one or two implants can lead to dramatic improvements in self image, quality of life and nutrition" Feine said.

Dentists need to do more to educate people about the importance of their teeth, said dentist Dr. Joel Rosenlicht.

"Patients really don't appreciate the value of their teeth until they are gone" he said.

Economic considerations, not those about health, often dictate what patients ultimately decide

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to do.

“It’s become like buying a car”, Taylor said. “You have to decide whether you want a Chevy or a Cadillac”.

“That’s why patients need to shop for implants as they would for a car”, he said. “People would be fools not to get another evaluation,” he added.

When they go shopping, dental patients today are likely to get a much better quality implant than they would have just five years ago.

New materials have made crowns sturdier and more natural looking. Imaging scans of the mouth have improved the precision with which incisions for implants are placed in the jaw, making for a better fit. And dental engineers have changed the shape and surface

texture of titanium screws, which helps promote rapid bone growth and healing around the implant, Taylor said.

Implant technology has improved so much that new procedures allow dentists to insert a complete set of implants in the upper or lower jaw in about an hour.

But at about \$18,000 for one row of teeth, such procedures will benefit only the wealthiest, who are also the group least likely to need implants, Feine said.

The poor elderly are much more likely to lose their teeth and if Feine is right, pay for it dearly with poorer nutrition and a shorter lifespan. In the United States, one of every three people older

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than 65 has lost all his or her teeth, she said. The percentage ranges from a high of 47% in West Virginia to a low of 13% in Hawaii, she said.

Feine recognizes that it is unlikely government health care programs will subsidize complete dental implants, but she said the cost of implants was only slightly more than the cost of dentures over the long run, when maintenance costs are included.

Even if the government doesn't step in, some experts say that the same technology that has improved the quality of implants might also help eventually drive down costs.

"Just like the cost of computers has come down, implants will probably become more affordable" dentist Sheldon Natkin predicted.

Others hope the market will help drive prices down, as more dentists join Periodontists and Oral Surgeons in offering implants.

"As implants become accepted as the standard of care, hopefully the fee for service will come down accordingly," Taylor said.