

## COLUMN

## Is it too late for me to replace my lost teeth?



**Dentally Speaking**  
by Jeffrey S. Haddad D.D.S.

Ideally, if you lose a tooth you try to replace it right away. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. Sometimes, your budget or your life just doesn't have room in it for replacing your teeth. The problem is that when it is a more favorable financial situation, it may in some ways be too late for a simple dental implant to be placed. This can be due to teeth crowding into the space left by the missing tooth, making it too tight for the dental implant, or the deterioration of the jawbone in this area because of no tooth being present. Does this mean that you are no longer a candidate to have your tooth or teeth replaced? Thankfully, this is not the case and we still have options for you.

When replacing lost teeth, you typically have three options:

- 1) A dental implant –this is a free-standing artificial tooth
- 2) A fixed dental bridge- capping teeth on both sides of the open space with a false “tooth in between
- 3) A removable partial or full denture

For purposes of this discussion, we will discuss the first two options.

### Dental Implants

Thankfully, as a result of 3D Cone Beam X-rays, we can view your entire upper and lower jaws in all three dimensions. We are then able to determine exactly how much bone is present and if the actual quality of the bone will support a dental implant. We can now virtually place an implant on the computer prior to the patient even being in the chair. We can then make a computerized surgical guide that allows us to place the dental implant precisely in the virtually planned position without the worries of past “exploratory” surgeries. It has made implant dentistry faster, more predictable, and less invasive for all our patients. More importantly, we can provide tooth replacements for patients that were previously told that they were not able to have this procedure.

### Advantages of Dental Implants

- Esthetic, functional, predictable, reliable
- Does not affect adjacent teeth
- Does not decay
- More economical long term
- Average lifespan 25 years

### Disadvantages of Dental Implants

- More expensive upfront cost
- Requires minor surgery
- More planning time
- Requires healing time before tooth replacement

Unfortunately, some people still are just not favorable candidates for dental implants, and a dental bridge is a more ideal solution to their problem.

### Dental Bridges

A fixed bridge is permanently cemented into place and can only removed by your dentist. It consists of one or more false teeth called “pontics” (one for each missing tooth) in the middle and one or more anchoring crowns called “abutment” teeth on either side (see diagram). The pontics fill in the gap while the abutment crowns are secured to the natural teeth adjacent to the gap, holding the bridge in place.

The natural teeth must be relatively healthy (structurally sound and free from decay) for this to work. The biggest downside to this process is that it is irreversible. Once the natural teeth are shaved/filled down, they cannot be used as regular teeth ever again.

### Advantages of Bridges

- Esthetic, functional, predictable, reliable
- Less costly upfront
- Requires less time for final result

### Disadvantages of Bridges

- Requires enamel removal of adjacent teeth
- If adjacent teeth have crowns, they must be redone
- Tooth decay is potential problem
- Root canal treatment may be required if nerves are affected
- Average lifespan 11 years

Many patients have given up hope on replacing lost teeth because they are unaware of the changes in dental technology that allow better solutions. Even if you have been told that you were not a candidate for a dental

implant or bridge, you should consider revisiting this idea with a dentist that focuses on this type of dentistry. Giving people back their proper function, aesthetics, and quality of life is one of the most fulfilling things a dentist can do for their patients.

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