

Implants are something to smile about

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Highland Park resident Edward Harrison is more secure in his smiles these days. Six months ago, he began the process of dental implantation with Dr. Daniel Marinic, a dental implant specialist in Evanston that will leave Harrison with five permanent replacement teeth.

"I had several old bridges that had deteriorated over the years," said 73-year-old Harrison. "I wanted something that was permanent. All bridges are temporary, some just last longer than others."

With so many advances in dental technology in recent years, more and more people are opting for implants.

"It's just a better procedure," said Dr. Arnold Gorchow of Dental Implant Center of the North Shore in Northbrook, who's been performing dental implants for 35 years. "I think (dental implants) have become the standard of care for missing teeth today. It's a much better way to replace missing teeth than anything else in dentistry today."

Toothsome issues

Many people will have to deal with missing teeth during their lives.

Nearly 70 percent of the U.S. population today will still lose some or all of their teeth due to gum disease and need some kind of replacements, said Marinic.

Prosthetic devices like bridges are often a temporary solution. However bridges sometimes require filing of adjacent teeth to fit properly. Due to the stress placed on them, those filed teeth may then become loose. And the bridges themselves eventually must be replaced.

Dr. Benjamin LoGiudice of the North Shore Oral Surgery and Dental Implant Center of Deerfield has been doing dental implant surgery for six years, and calls it a win-win for patient and practitioner.

"I enjoy helping patients regain their smile back and their ability to function with the implants," he said. "I think it's becoming more common as the population ages. In the right cases, it's a great treatment option and they have a very high success rate."

Multi-step process

Dental implants originated more than 30 years ago in Sweden. The process involves surgically inserting a titanium post into the jawbone to anchor the crown that will serve as the new tooth. The bone bonds to the post, or in some cases where there is bone loss, a bone graft is done using animal, human, or the person's own bone.

A crown is then attached to the small posts that protrude through the gums where the original tooth was. Anchored to the jawbone, the new "tooth" is far more stable than a bridge or false teeth.

For people who have lost teeth due to accident, disease, or other factors, an implant proves to be a far better choice than dentures or bridges.

While most practitioners have been using panoramic x-rays of the jaw and mouth for decades to help in planning the placement of the implants, many now use medical CT scanners to get a 3D image for implant placement.

In the last few years, the procedure has gone even more hi-tech.

Using the same technology originally used in robotic surgery, guided implant surgery uses a lower-radiation CVBT (conebeam volumetric tomogram) scanner that provides a 3D image of the mouth, nerves and jaws.

Using specialized software, the dental surgeon can virtually plan the surgery before any actual work is done. A template of the implant plan allows the dental surgeon to place the implants precisely where they belong.

Evanston's Marinic is one of the few dentists in the area using the CT technology.

"It's more precise and minimally invasive," said Marinic, who was named a Fellow of the International Congress of Oral Implantologists in 2005. "With really good dentures that fit well, (chewing ability) goes up 10 percent. With four implants it goes up to 90 percent. Implants for most people are a wonderful way to feel whole again."

Marinic explained that the scanner "spins" around the patient's head, taking 200 picture "slices" in increments. The computer then reformats the images into a three-dimensional image. There are several different manufacturers and programs in use today.

Planning implants

Marinic has the images reformatted, then plans where the implants will go. That information is used to produce an actual template that will be placed in the patient's mouth to use as a drilling guide for the implants.

Drilling can be a scary word to some dental patients, but those who have gone through the implant process say it was even easier than having the (traditionally) dreaded root canal.

Harrison said that by far, getting implants was the best dental experience he's had in more than 50 years of dental visits.

Visiting dentists since 1930, he's seen the profession advance so much, "It's amazing," he said.

And the implant work "was the least painful dental procedure I've ever gone through. The drilling was less invasive than a root canal. It's been a long process, but it worked.

It just seems with this like you have real teeth. I don't even feel them. I don't even think about them," said Harrison.

Sheila Barron, an interior designer of Winnetka, had two implants done by Marinic more than a year ago. She, too, had a bridge for over 25 years and wanted something that fit better. "It kept popping out," she said.

Besides getting veneers, she said getting the implants was the next best thing she's ever done.

"Because they're permanent, I knew I wouldn't have any more problems," she said. "They're just like your natural teeth. It's just something you have and then you forget about it."