

Guide to dental implants

- ◆ What is a dental implant?
- ◆ What can dental implants be used for?
- ◆ What is involved in the implant procedure?
- ◆ How should implants be cared for?

What is a dental implant?

A **dental implant** is a type of artificial tooth that can be used to permanently replace lost, damaged, or badly decayed teeth. It typically consists of several elements (see **Box**). An **anchor**, usually a titanium rod, is surgically inserted into the bone under the gums; it fuses with the bone (osseointegration) during healing to give a stable tooth base. An **abutment** is connected to the top of the anchor to allow the attachment of the **prosthesis**, which is the custom-made, visible part of the tooth replacement.

What can dental implants be used for?

Dental implants can be used to replace single or multiple teeth, and even a complete upper or lower set of teeth. They are an alternative to conventional **crowns**, **dental bridges**, and **partial/complete dentures**.

Artificial teeth fixed or supported by an implant allow proper chewing and speech, and help restore the smile and face shape. Many patients find that implant-supported tooth replacements look natural and feel secure and comfortable.

What is involved in the implant procedure?

- The clinician uses radiographs to help evaluate whether a patient is a good candidate to receive a dental implant.
- Surgery is performed to insert the anchor (dentures may need several anchors); bone takes up to 6 months to grow around the anchor. Some implants need a second surgery to connect the abutment; some implants already have the abutment attached.
- The artificial teeth are then made and attached to the abutment; several fittings may be required, so this step can take 1 to 2 months.

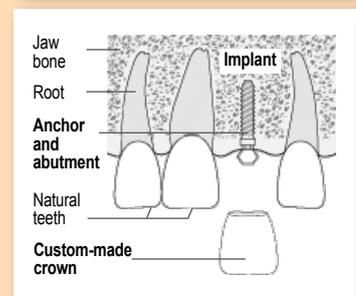
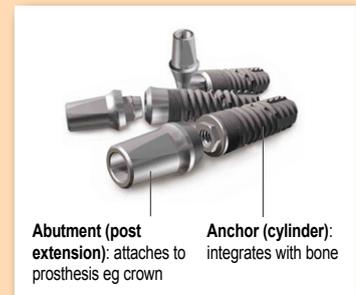
How should implants be cared for?

Artificial teeth fixed by implants are usually only removable by a dentist and are not taken out for cleaning. Some types of implant-supported dentures are removable, but, unlike conventional dentures, they do not use adhesives.

The crowns of implants are not susceptible to tooth decay, but they can still harbour plaque and get damaged by accident or tooth wear; however, they can be replaced by your dentist.

Proper care of dental implants involves thoroughly cleaning both the artificial teeth and any neighbouring teeth, flossing, wearing a mouth guard for sports, and regularly seeing your dentist and hygienist, who may also give you special instructions for caring for your implants.

Parts of an implant



Sources: HK Department of Health Tooth Club, <www.toothclub.gov.hk>; American Dental Association, <www.ada.org>; bottom figure courtesy of <www.bupa.co.uk>.

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