

Soldiers should replace missing teeth to ensure dental readiness—and enhance their smile

By CRDAMC Public Affairs

FORT HOOD, Texas--With all the issues facing Soldiers today, the loss of a tooth or two might seem minor. But the dental professionals at Fort Hood stress the importance of replacing missing teeth to ensure Soldiers' dental readiness.

“Not only that, but correcting the loss of a tooth is an important process to enhance the smiles of Soldiers,” said Maj. (Dr.) Robert Selders, a dentist with the U.S. Army Dental Activity (DENTAC) at Fort Hood.

Teeth can be lost for a variety of reasons. Sometimes teeth are pulled to make room in the mouth. Other times they are lost because of damage from cavities and/or decay where the best option is to have the tooth pulled.

“Having a hole, whether in the front or back of the mouth, can sometimes cause problems. Missing teeth can make chewing difficult, or may prevent people from smiling,” Selders said. “Not every tooth can be replaced, nor is it always necessary to replace one. Some areas of the mouth present problems for keeping original teeth or their replacements. Dentists can make a determination for the best course of action. Patients first have to be examined to see if there is any other mouth disease that needs treatment to prevent further tooth pain or loss.”

Tooth replacement comes in two forms: removable or fixed. Removable replacements, called partial dentures, are similar to dentures where the teeth can be taken out at night or for cleaning. Removable partial dentures can replace several teeth and correct dents in bone. They are usually held in place by metal springs which do allow some movement.

“Typically, treatment for partials is a relatively simple process. Patients do not require dental shots because their teeth are not altered at all,” Selders explained. “But partials are not usually durable. The springs can wear out over the years and require replacement of the entire denture.”

Fixed replacements, called bridges, are glued in place on neighboring natural teeth or on artificial roots (dental implants). A bridge is a false tooth held in place by a cap or crown on the neighboring teeth which are ground down to make room for the cap.

“The fixed option is preferred by some because the replacement behaves more like natural teeth,” Selders said. “However, having a bridge requires detailed cleaning of the supporting teeth. If a cavity forms under the bridge, it can cause the loss of the bridge and possibly the neighboring teeth. That being said, bridges are a good option if properly maintained through brushing and flossing.”

Replacing front teeth presents a different challenge, Selders said. Once a front tooth is pulled, the bone that held the tooth in place is typically absorbed by the body. This leaves a dent in the jaw that can cause the size of the replacement tooth to be much larger than a natural tooth.

“Completing the smile in this case will have to include compensating for the loss of bone in the area. Fixing the dent in the bone can be as easy as adding material to a denture or as complicated as surgical replacement of bone, depending on the individual,” he added.

Dental implants are another fixed option to replace missing teeth that does not require grinding down neighboring teeth or partial dentures. Dental implants are surgical metal posts that are drilled into the jaw in the area of a lost tooth. Months later, after the site has healed, a crown is placed on the post. Dental implants, unlike bridges and partial dentures, require both space for a new tooth and bone for the post. Sometimes additional surgical treatment is necessary to graft bone in the site.

“Dental implant therapy requires cutting of the gums and stitches, which cause pain for a few days. Typically, two surgeries are necessary before a crown is placed on the post,” he said.

“Once in place, the crown is very much like a natural tooth. It is brushed and flossed to keep the gums and bone around it healthy.”

As with all surgeries, healing is important for success, Selders said, and there are many factors which may prevent proper healing of dental implants.

“One major factor is cigarette smoking. Cigarette smoking can prevent bone healing around the dental implant causing it to get infected and fall out. Even if the jawbone heals to the implant,

smoking can cause the dental implant to get infected later on,” he said. “Many dentists suggest patients wishing to pursue dental implant therapy stop smoking.”

Whatever type of tooth replacement is used, the major concern for Soldiers is how much time will it involve.

“Different options take more or less time. Bridges can be done as quickly as two weeks. Removable partials can take two to three weeks. Dental implants can take a year,” stated Selders. “It is essential that the treatment is started and finished at the same place to prevent confusion and delay. This might mean delaying soldiers’ treatment until they return from deployment or arrive at their next duty station.”

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missing tooth.jpg



Dental professionals at Fort Hood stress the importance of replacing missing teeth to ensure Soldiers’ dental readiness and to enhance their smile. (Thinkstock image)

bridge 2.jpg



A common method to replace missing teeth is the use of fixed replacements, called bridges, which are glued in place on neighboring natural teeth or on artificial roots (dental implants). Bridges are typically the preferred option as the replacement behaves more like natural teeth. (Thinkstock image)

