Dental implants

This leaflet will answer some of your questions about having a dental implant. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives of the procedure, as well as what to expect when you come to hospital. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the dentist or dental nurse caring for you.

What are dental implants?
They are artificial replacements for your tooth roots that are placed within the bone of your jaw to help support dentures, crowns (caps) or bridges. Implants should provide you with a long-lasting tooth replacement if they are cared for in the same way that teeth should be cared for.

What happens during the placement of a dental implant?
Treatment is normally divided into 2 or 3 stages, each of which might involve several visits to your dentist.

Stage 1 - Pre-operative assessment
Before implants can be placed, X-rays and mould (impressions) of your mouth will be needed. These allow us to plan the best way to treat you. This will involve several visits to the hospital.

Stage 2 - Treatment
The next stage of your treatment is to insert the implants. Your dentist will tell you if minor grafting is needed at the same time. This is normally done under local anaesthetic (an injection which makes the area where we are working numb) by lifting the gum away from the bone, then carefully drilling into the jaw bone. The implant is inserted into the bone and the gum is replaced and held together with stitches. The stitches are removed about a week later.

After insertion, some types of implant will stick out through the gum, while other types will be buried underneath the gum. The implants will usually be left for at least 3 months before they are used to support replacement teeth. Implants buried under the gum will need a second small surgical procedure to expose them before they can be used.

Stage 3 - Restorative treatment
You will need more than one appointment to make your crowns, bridges or denture. This will include taking moulds and checking the fit of the parts used to make your replacement teeth. In total, treatment could take 6 to 12 months.

Your implant treatment will be done by qualified dentists who are consultants, specialists or postgraduate students. Although consultants will be responsible for your care, you might be treated by more than one dentist.

Benefits of dental implants
Dental implants are very useful. We use them when we do not want to crown (cap) healthy teeth or when a denture or bridge would be difficult (or impossible) because there are no suitable teeth or gums for support.
What are the risks?
There is a small risk that the implants might not fuse properly with the bone in your mouth and so cannot be used. The risk is higher in certain people, particularly those who smoke. We will tell you if we think the risk of failure is higher than normal in your case.

Implant placement involves surgery in your mouth and so will be followed by some soreness, swelling, bleeding or bruising. Any discomfort is usually controlled with simple painkillers and should only last 2 to 7 days.

It is possible for parts of your implants to loosen or wear out with time. This can lead to failure of the implant, or the restoration on the implant, if not treated quickly. You will be responsible for the long-term care of your implants, by seeking care at your own dentist at your own cost.

Some patients who need implants do not have enough bone, so it might be necessary to do a bone graft. This involves more surgery (with some swelling, bruising and pain). The risks of this procedure will be explained to you separately. With a bone graft, treatment can take 4 to 6 months longer (see our information on Minor bone grafting for more information).

Other treatment options
The available treatment options will be different for everyone, and will be discussed with you on an individual basis. These might include no treatment, preparing other teeth for crowns or bridges, or an alternative design of denture (if possible).

How you can prepare for a dental implant
Please make sure you have told us about any problems with your health and about any medicines you are taking. Some medical conditions change the advice and information we need to give you.

If you are a smoker we strongly advise you to quit and remain a non-smoker in the long term. This will significantly reduce the risk of some implant complications. For help giving up smoking, please speak to your nurse, or call the Trust stop smoking service, phone: 020 7188 0995, or call the NHS Smoking Helpline, phone: 0800 169 0 169.

Consent – asking for your permission
We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves. If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

We will tell you about your planned treatment in detail before we start. However, there are times during treatment when we have to change the planned treatment. If this is necessary we will make sure that you are told and give you the choice to proceed. If you are having sedation or a general anaesthetic for your treatment, we will discuss all possible alternative treatments with you before we start.

Will you feel any pain?
The level of discomfort is different for everyone and usually requires painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. It is better to take these before the local anaesthesia wears off, at the interval and maximum dose prescribed on the packet, for the first 48 hours.
After the procedure
If you have had the procedure under local anaesthetic you can leave hospital as soon as the procedure has been completed and you feel well enough. You should be able to eat normally after the surgery but a soft diet might be advised by your surgeon. You should avoid alcohol for 24 hours. Implant patients are advised to quit smoking before starting treatment and to remain a non-smoker in the long-term.

What you need to do after you go home
You should be able to return to work within a day of your treatment. Sometimes you might not be able to wear your dentures for up to 2 weeks after the surgery (the doctor or nurse treating you will let you know if this is the case). You should not brush the area of the implants for a week after the procedure. Use a mouthwash containing chlorhexidine (for example, Corsodyl®) to keep the area free of plaque. You will be given more personalised advice about looking after your implants after your treatment.

Follow-up appointments
Any dental restorations or dentures based on implants will need regular follow-up and maintenance. Your next appointment will be given to you before you leave hospital or sent to you in the post. We will expect you to be willing to come in for such care, and for regular checks of the implants themselves.

Contact us
If you have any problems please contact the dental implant department, phone: 020 7188 1816, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm email: dentalimplants@gstt.nhs.uk

For emergencies outside these hours go to your nearest Emergency Department (A&E).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, and services offered at our hospitals, please visit web: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or contact our helpline, phone: 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm email: mymedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns
For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), phone: 020 7188 8801 email: pals@gstt.nhs.uk. To make a complaint contact the complaints department phone: 020 7188 3514 email: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111
This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day, phone: 111 web: www.111.nhs.uk