



PHOTO BY G. RANDALL GOSS

DENTAL IMPLANTS

No pain, lots of gain

BETH ANNE PIEHL

Sue Parks has a claim to fame she likes to share about going to the dentist.

"I'm like their worst patient, and I tell them that when I walk in the door," laughs Parks, a resident of Eastport, just south of Charlevoix. "I'm Chicken Little when I go to the dentist."

"But this, it was no problem."

To an outsider who hasn't had dental implants, it sounds like something that would make a patient like Parks run away in horror. But the process she's referring to, having screws drilled into her jawbones, involves little to no pain because there are no nerves inside the bones.

Of course, Parks was sedated during the procedure at the hands of Dr. Michael Sullivan, of Beacon Dental Center in Charlevoix. But even afterward, "I had no pain whatsoever. And I was panicky about it."

What was uncomfortable for Parks, 70, was the pain she had been experiencing from an infection that had developed under some long-in-place crowns. Sullivan recommended two dental implants, a process which involves removing the teeth causing

the problem, drilling the implant posts into the jawbone, allowing the implants to heal and then attaching porcelain teeth to the posts.

"There are three options for someone who is missing a tooth or teeth," Sullivan explained. "An implant, a bridge or a removable partial denture, something you take in and out. The implant is the standard of care. And implants are 95 percent successful."

The implant option is available for those over 18 who are missing a single tooth or a mouthful. Troublesome teeth can also be removed and replaced with implants.

Sullivan said titanium implants are the preferred course of treatment because of their durability and lifetime permanence. Conversely, bridges, for example, have a lifespan of around eight years.

"And with an implant, after it's healed to the bone it's stronger than a natural tooth," Sullivan said.

For those a bit squeamish, the procedure's bark is apparently worse than its bite. The patient's gum is surgically opened, revealing the bone underneath, and the implant posts



Before: A gap from missing teeth.



The implants are screwed into the jawbone.



Porcelain-crafted teeth are placed.

are secured to it, Sullivan said.

After a healing time of several months, the new teeth are attached and the patient may eat or drink anything without worry. This is a benefit over traditional dentures as well, considering the difficulty some have in keeping dentures secured in their mouth, particularly the lower.

For patients who are suffering bone deterioration, Sullivan is able to graft bone into the jaw to stabilize it enough to support the implants.

In instances when full upper and/or lower jaws require implants, about four to six total screws are drilled into the jawbones, with a row of man-made teeth crafted and bolted to those posts. Each individual tooth does not require its own screw.

For patients who have dentures already, Sullivan is also able to add attachments to the dentures so they can be bolted to implants in similar fashion, making them permanent, at a less expensive price.

Implants are not yet covered by insurances, even though the American Dental Association recommends them as the standard of care, Sullivan noted. Costs start around \$1,200.

For Parks, her two new teeth on the top row are priceless.

"I can eat whatever I want, I don't even know they're there," she said. "What they do is amazing. For people who are suffering, there's just no need to." GL

THE PROCESS

- Consultation, photos of mouth taken
- Implant surgery to secure the posts to the jawbone
- Soft-food diet for a few weeks afterward
- Four month post-surgery recovery to allow the implants to secure to the jawbone
- New teeth bolted to the implant screws
- The benefits: Stronger than natural teeth, virtually painless, work for one tooth or a full arch, permanent
- Something to consider about Sullivan's practice: He offers IV sedation, for involved procedures such as the implants to routine cleanings for those with dental-visit anxiety.



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