

SENIOR FITNESS

Healthy Smile More than just Cosmetic

**By
Jim Evans**

DEAR JIM: I've had a long history of dental problems during my 74 years and have several missing teeth. I've become accustomed over the years to covering my mouth when I smile or smiling without showing my teeth – what's left of them anyway – so you might say I've learned to live with my appearance. I can only eat soft foods and liquids now, but I am gaining weight for some reason, and my health seems to be deteriorating. Can you recommend any special diet or exercise program that might help for a guy who can't chew very well? **TOOTHLESS IN TACOMA.**

DEAR TOOTHLESS: You've heard the old saying, "don't put the cart before the horse?" While proper diet and exercise are important in restoring and maintaining your health, let's get those teeth in shape first. Even one missing tooth can wreak havoc with your health because it causes the rest of your teeth to shift out of position leading to bone loss, gum disease, and even malnutrition. I would not be surprised if you are already experiencing some of these maladies.

It is surprising – and appalling - that, in this day and age, almost 31.5 million Americans are missing some or all of their teeth ("No teeth, no problem," Mayrav Saar, *The Orange County Register*, May 21, 2005). There are, of course, legitimate reasons why people lose their teeth – accidents, trauma, illness, neglect, disease, heredity, etc. – but there is no legitimate reason why people should continue to live with missing teeth when there are solutions available. And the solutions are more than just cosmetic.

Many people opt for removable dentures or bridges, but this often requires the modification of existing healthy teeth for support. Moreover, "temporaries" as they are often referred to, have a tendency to move around in your mouth (especially lower dentures) affecting both speech and eating. And, we have all seen and heard of embarrassing situations where people have "lost" their dentures at inappropriate times (as if there was ever an "appropriate" time to lose them). Consequently, more and more people are choosing dental implants as a more permanent solution.

Implants are exactly what they imply – small titanium fixtures that are implanted into the upper or lower jaw to bond with the bone and serve as an anchor for replacement teeth. According to Dr. Azita Vakili, a well-known prosthodontist in Solana Beach, California, "many people with missing teeth are actually malnourished because the soft foods and liquids that they are eating do not provide all the nutrients and roughage that they need for optimal health. Dental implants

provide a permanent solution and allow you to eat normally. They look and feel like real teeth and will help to preserve your facial appearance and prevent bone loss.”

Your generation was not exposed to much of today’s modern dentistry when you were growing up, so it is not unusual to see many older adults with missing teeth and/or dentures. Many grew up with a legitimate fear of going to the dentist too– I know because it was not a pleasurable experience when I was growing up either. I can still remember being “put under” with ether to have a molar pulled, and I have never forgotten the nauseating smell of ether (or the tooth that the dentist gave me as a souvenir).

However, modern dentistry has come a long way. You can now be completely sedated if necessary while undergoing any dental procedures, and you won’t feel a thing. In fact, you can just lay back and take a nap, and by the time you wake up, it will all be over. So now what’s your excuse? And don’t tell me you can’t afford to go to the dentist - you can’t afford not to. There are affordable financing plans for dental work just like there are financing plans for purchasing a car, furniture, or anything else. And age is not a factor either. “I have had patients over 90 years old,” says Dr. Vakili. “Your health is more of a determining factor than your age. If you are healthy enough to have a tooth extracted, you are probably healthy enough to consider implants.”

So, make an appointment with your dentist today. Healthy teeth can have a positive impact on your overall health – and you might learn to smile again without covering your mouth too. We’ll talk about the exercise later. First things first.

Jim Evans is a 38-year veteran of the health and fitness industry and a nationally recognized consultant on fitness for seniors. He is also host of the popular radio talk show “Forever Young” on San Diego’s KCBQ 1170 AM (KCBQ.com) on Saturdays at 10:00 A.M. (PST).