

Understanding Dental Bridges



If you have one or more missing teeth, your dentist may suggest creating a bridge to prevent:

- ▶ Gum disease
- ▶ Bone loss
- ▶ Teeth that shift out of position within your mouth
- ▶ Development of a temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorder

The most common kind of bridge will involve placing crowns on the teeth that are on both sides of the gap. The formal name is abutment teeth. You need to have a minimum of two, but your dentist may choose to use more teeth than that if more support is needed. The abutment teeth act as anchors, and they can be either the original tooth or implants. Your dentist will then place one or more false teeth, called pontics, between the abutment teeth. If your dentist uses existing teeth as the abutment teeth, then it will be necessary to shape them so they can be fitted with crowns. Your dentist will also make impressions of your teeth. These impressions will act as models for the bridge, pontic, and crowns, all of which will be created in a dental lab. Your dentist will make and install a temporary bridge for you. Once the bridge, pontic, and crowns are ready, the dentist will install and adjust them as necessary. It won't be

cemented in permanently until the dentist is convinced the fit is correct.

If you don't have two adjacent teeth next to the gap, your dentist may suggest using something called a cantilever bridge to provide the necessary support. In some cases, your dentist might also suggest something called a Maryland bonded bridge. These are also called Maryland bridges and resin-bonded bridges. They consist of plastic teeth and gum whose support comes from a metal frame. The dentist bonds metal wings on both sides of the bridge to your remaining teeth.

Why do you need a bridge? You could think of your teeth as books on a shelf. If the shelf is full, the books stay upright on the shelf. Take too many away, however, and the books are likely to fall. When you've lost one or more teeth, your teeth no longer have support from the missing teeth to help them stay in the right place, and they can move out of place because they don't have surrounding teeth to keep them in a stable position anymore. Unfortunately, though, moving does more than just make them less stable; it can also ruin your bite. Since they aren't in the right place on your jaw bone anymore, it becomes more difficult for you to eat and much easier for them to fall out. That's why losing one tooth can lead to losing many — and maybe all — of your teeth.

You are more likely to suffer bone loss within the jaw if you don't have teeth for the same reason you are likely to suffer muscle loss if you don't move enough. Your jaw needs teeth in order to stay healthy, every bit as much as your teeth need your jaw in order to give them support and keep them in the correct places.

Not least of the reasons to get a bridge is how it makes you look and how it affects your health. Losing teeth ages you, because it changes the shape of your face for the worse, it ruins your smile, and it makes it harder for you to speak clearly. It's important not to ignore the effect of these things on your health. Every time you take a bite, you are applying pressure. That's fine if you have a healthy bite. But if lost teeth have ruined your bite, that pressure is being directed to the wrong places. Your ability to eat is affected, and the likelihood that other teeth will also fail is increased because those teeth are being subjected to the misdirected forces. Being able to eat a healthy diet is the very foundation of your health. Take that away, along with the additional stress on your remaining teeth, and increased difficulty in being able to communicate, and it's easy to see how losing teeth can start a negative spiral. Age doesn't make you old; poor health does. And losing teeth leads to poor health.

Cost of a bridge varies. This is a procedure that is covered by insurance, if you are fortunate enough to enjoy that benefit, but your dentist will be happy to work with you on payment for the work done. You will also help decide some of the specifics of your bridge, such as the materials used. For example, your dentist may recommend porcelain or ceramic bridges that match the existing color of your teeth.

How long will your bridge last? Usually, you can count on five to 15 years if you take good care of it. It might even last longer than that. Good oral hygiene will be key — brushing, flossing, mouthwash, regular cleanings and exams, and avoiding foods that could damage the bridge will all be part of your maintenance regime. You won't want to chew anything too hard, because that could damage the bridge.

With care and diligence, you can do a great deal to help your bridge last a long time. At the same time, you will also be preserving your own health and well-being.