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Implant Impact

A look at a sinus lift and tooth implant procedure. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I'm missing an upper molar and I want an implant to replace it. My dentist referred me for a "sinus lift" procedure before I can have the implant placed. Why do I need that and what is involved?

A: An implant is a mechanical root form that is inserted into bone, onto which we attach a replacement tooth. Implant success depends on the amount and quality of the available bone in the site of your missing tooth.

The maxillary sinus is a hollow chamber that lies behind our cheek bones and underneath our eyeballs. Its purpose is to humidify, warm, and filter the air we breathe. When we are babies the sinus is about the size of a pea and it naturally grows over time. If you have suffered from chronic congestion, allergies or sinusitis you might have developed an enlarged and low sinus cavity, creating decreased ability to drain the developing mucous into the nose where you can either swallow it or blow it out.

In addition, if you have been missing your tooth for a while, the bone may have shrunk. Any combination of an enlarged sinus and diminished bone could mean you might not have enough bone to place that implant without it penetrating the sinus cavity. Fortunately, there is a solution.

The sinus lift procedure means opening up a small window in the gum/bone (or entering a fresh extraction site), just large enough to insert small blunt instruments (or more recently a water pressure inducing tool) in order to gently push the membrane upward. We typically lift it about a half inch. We next fill the gap with a bone graft and then protect the small window by stitching it closed. After four months of healing, the bone will have grown into the vacant space and you will be ready for the implant placement procedure. Many times the implant can be placed at the same appointment as the sinus lift, eliminating the need for a second surgery.

If you suffer from sinus disease or infection you may not be a good candidate for a sinus lift until the chamber is healthy. Other contraindications include previous radiation treatment or uncontrolled systemic disease that might inhibit healing.

In 2013, we are all so fortunate to consider dental implants such a predictable solution for missing teeth. A sinus lift is considered a fairly common procedure and we are now enjoying a 90% success rate for implant survival following the lift. Go for it. You'll be glad to have your tooth back!