

Root Canal or Implant? Weighing Saving vs. Replacing a Tooth

By Joy of Dentistry Health Desk · 7 min read

It is one of the more unsettling moments in a dental chair: you are told a tooth is in trouble, and you have a choice to make. Do you try to save it with a root canal, or remove it and replace it with an implant? Both are well-established routes, and neither is automatically the right one. The sensible decision depends on the tooth in front of you, your mouth as a whole, and what a dentist finds on examination.

This is a decision guide, not a verdict. The goal here is to lay out the factors a dentist weighs so that, when you sit down for your own conversation, the options make sense rather than arriving as a surprise.

Two different philosophies

At heart, this is a choice between keeping your natural tooth and replacing it. Saving a tooth treats the inside of the existing tooth and keeps the root in place. Replacing it means removing the whole tooth, root and all, and placing an artificial one anchored in the jaw.

Dentistry generally leans toward keeping a natural tooth when it can be reliably kept, because your own tooth comes with its root, its attachment to the bone, and the way it sits among its neighbours. But "when it can be reliably kept" is the important clause. Sometimes a tooth is too damaged to give a dependable result, and in that situation replacing it can be the more sound long-term choice.

What a dentist examines first

Before anyone recommends a path, several things are assessed, usually with X-rays or three-dimensional imaging:

- **How much healthy tooth remains.** A tooth needs enough solid structure left to be restored and to function. Very little remaining tooth can make a long-term repair less predictable.
- **The nature of the problem.** A deep cavity or an infected nerve is a different situation from a crack that runs down into the root.

- **Cracks and fractures.** A vertical fracture extending into the root is often what tips a case toward removal, because it undermines the foundation.
- **The health of the surrounding bone and gums.** This affects both whether a tooth can be kept and whether the site could support an implant later.

The case for saving the tooth

If enough sound structure remains and the supporting tissues are healthy, treating the inside of the tooth and then restoring it, often with a crown, can let you keep your own tooth in service. Many people are reassured to learn how routine and well-understood [root canal therapy](#) has become; the aim is to relieve the problem and preserve a tooth that would otherwise be lost. A restored tooth is not immortal, but a well-done repair on a suitable tooth can serve for a long time.

The case for replacing it

When a tooth is cracked too deeply, has too little structure to rebuild dependably, or has already been treated repeatedly without lasting success, removing it and considering a replacement may give a steadier result. In that scenario [a dental implant](#) is one option a dentist may raise, alongside other ways of filling the gap. An implant does not decay the way a natural tooth can, though it still depends on healthy gums and bone and on ongoing care.

Comparing the two at a glance

Consideration	Saving the tooth	Replacing with an implant
What it keeps	Your natural tooth and its root	Replaces the tooth with an artificial post and crown
Best suited to	Teeth with enough sound structure and healthy support	Teeth too damaged or fractured to restore dependably
Decay risk	The restored tooth can still decay at its margins	The implant itself will not decay, but tissues around it need care
Timeline	Often completed over a shorter course of visits	Usually involves healing time and several stages
Upkeep	Normal brushing, flossing, and checkups	Diligent cleaning and regular professional monitoring

Treat the table as orientation rather than a scoreboard. Timelines and suitability vary with the individual tooth, and your dentist will fit the comparison to your specific case.

The factors that often tip the balance

A few points come up again and again when a dentist and patient talk this through:

- **Predictability.** How confident is the clinician that each option will give a lasting, functional result for this particular tooth?
- **The condition of the neighbours.** Healthy adjacent teeth may favour one approach; compromised ones may change the plan.
- **Your general health and habits.** Factors such as smoking or conditions affecting healing bear more on the implant route, which depends on the body healing around the post.
- **Your own priorities.** Time, the number of visits you can manage, and how you feel about keeping versus replacing all legitimately belong in the discussion.

Because these factors interact, two people with what looks like the same broken tooth can reasonably end up with different plans. That is not inconsistency; it is the assessment doing its job. The decision belongs to you and your dentist together, informed by examination and imaging rather than by a rule of thumb.

Frequently asked questions

Is it better to save a tooth or get an implant?

There is no single answer that fits everyone. When a tooth has enough healthy structure and sound support, keeping it is often preferred, because nothing replaces a natural tooth and its root exactly. When a tooth is too damaged to restore dependably, replacing it can be the steadier choice. Which applies to you depends on an in-person examination.

Does a saved tooth last as long as an implant?

Both can serve for many years when the case suits them and they are well cared for, but neither comes with a guarantee. A restored natural tooth can still decay at its edges, while an implant will not decay but relies on healthy surrounding tissue. Longevity depends on the specific situation, upkeep, and regular professional care.

If I choose a root canal and it does not work, can I still get an implant later?

Often yes, though it depends on the condition of the tooth and the surrounding bone at that point. Starting by trying to keep a natural tooth does not necessarily close off a later implant, but this is exactly the kind of sequencing your dentist can map out for your case.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Root Canal Treatment](#) — patient overview of treating an infected or damaged tooth.
- [Canadian Dental Association — Dental Implants](#) — what implants are and how they replace missing teeth.
- [Ontario Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — general guidance for Ontario dental patients.

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