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Taking care of your teeth

An experience that's usually well worth the price. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q. The doctor has proposed a root canal, core build-up and crown. How much is it going to cost?

A. Dentistry can be “surprisingly expensive” depending on your perception of value versus cost. For some, a cleaning, exam and x-rays seems expensive, and for others a full mouth reconstruction seems like a bargain. Perception is everything!

I recently placed an implant crown on a lower back tooth for a 92 year old woman. We noticed she drove a car that was falling apart at the seams. Probing, I learned she wanted to live all her days with a full complement of teeth. That was her value. Conversely, the very same week, I extracted an upper (visible) bicuspid on a 23 year old man. What would you chose?

Look, I'm a tooth geek. I am in the tooth-saving business and I LOVE teeth. At the same time I am not sure what I'd do if I had to choose between saving a molar and taking my family on our one yearly vacation. Still it disturbs me that Americans spend more money on big screen TVs every year than ALL of dentistry. Not just TVs...big screen TVs!

My role as a dentist is not to judge, but to help people understand the long-term implications of their choices...including the choice to sacrifice teeth. Many people understand the esthetic value of a beautiful smile, but they fail to realize the health value of treating gum disease and reinforcing back teeth. A fifth grader taught me this: Of the entire ectoderm (outer covering of the body), teeth are the only biologic structure that does not repair itself. Think about that. If you color or cut your hair and you hate it...presto, eight weeks later you start again. Hair, skin, nails, and even the cornea of the eye will heal upon insult. Not your teeth-every tiny bit you lose is gone for good!

Add to that the idea that the average non-smoking adult lives into their mid-eighties and NEEDS to digest food well to be healthy and energetic. Chewing food (the function of back teeth) is the first and perhaps most important step in digestion-it breaks the food into usable, digestible particles.

So replacing broken or missing tooth structure may seem like a big expense now, but in the long run it will likely preserve your health and your wallet.