Making a decision is not always easy and a number of different factors need to be taken into account. This article may help you to ask the right questions to make an informed decision.

--- Factors influencing extraction

1. How much of the tooth is left?
The most important factor is the amount of tooth remaining that shows above the gum line, on which a crown can be attached and the tooth restored to give a functional and aesthetic result. If very little of the original tooth material remains, then although technically the tooth can be root-filled and restored, the final result may not be strong enough to last any length of time. (Fig 2)

--- What is a dental implant?
The implant is a titanium screw that is placed into the jawbone to which an artificial crown can be attached (Fig 1). It is designed to replace the natural tooth, both in terms of function and aesthetics. It requires an adequate quantity and quality of bone for the implant to become secure. If there is insufficient bone then various additional procedures may be required to enhance the amount of the existing bone, such as grafting natural or artificial bone.

--- What are the alternatives to implants?
Provided the natural tooth is still in place, root canal or endodontic treatment may be an alternative to an implant. This involves the removal of the dental pulp (nerves and blood vessels) from the root canals of teeth. The canals are cleaned and shaped and a root filling is placed to seal the canals (Fig 1). Although it can be technically more difficult than the placement of an implant, a root canal treatment may be a more appropriate solution, provided it is carried out properly.

--- There’s an alternative to a dental implant

Your dentist may have told you that your tooth has to be extracted and can be replaced with an implant. Is there an alternative? Although a dental implant is recognised today as an excellent long-term solution, keeping original teeth is always better. That’s why you should consult an endodontist (root canal specialist). Often a ‘condemned’ tooth can be saved and restored to full use.

"The amount of bone required to keep a tooth in place is less than that required to place an implant.”
Tony Druttman

Fig 1. Implant By Dr Michael Zybutz:
Root canal treatment by Dr Tony Druttman

Fig 2. X-ray of a molar tooth with all of the tooth above the gum line destroyed. Although restoration would be technically possible, the tooth would be very weak. The better decision would be to replace it with an implant.
3. How much bone is left around the tooth?
The amount of bone required to keep a tooth in place is less than that required to place an implant. Having said that, if there is enough bone to secure an implant, it may be a better solution than keeping a loose tooth.

4. What are the chances of success?
Success rates for both root canal treatment and implants are high. However, there are no guarantees. Implants can fail to osseo-integrate (create a biological fusion with the bone) and there are no published figures for these failures. Implants can be difficult to place in exactly the right position and this can be critical especially at the front of the mouth. Inadequate treatment planning can lead to serious aesthetic failures (Fig 4) and at times correction of an underlying aesthetic problem can be enormously challenging (Fig 5). If an implant does fail, then it has to be removed.

If root canal treatment fails, it may be possible to re-treat the tooth either surgically or non-surgically. If that fails, the tooth would then have to be extracted.

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