

A ground-breaking dental technique which stretches the jaw, allowing permanent implants to be inserted, is becoming a serious alternative to dentures. ADRIAN LEE reports

WHEN Peter Palmer was sent flying from the pillion of a friend's motorbike more than 20 years ago, the loss of his two front teeth was the least of his worries.

He spent four months in hospital after suffering serious internal injuries, which eventually healed. The damage to his teeth was to have a longer-lasting impact. This has only recently been resolved by a new form of dental treatment.

Because the jaw bone contracts when teeth are lost, some dentists are now using a technique called bone expansion, which stretches it and allows implants to be fitted. The implants, made from the metal titanium, are inserted into the jaw to replace the natural root.

The treatment is emerging as a viable but expensive alternative to dentures.

"I can't really remember the accident but my teeth smashed into my mate's crash helmet," says Peter, 46, a father-of-two, who has his own business selling vehicle parts. "My mouth looked horrendous."

His dentist initially fitted crowns, using what little remained of Peter's teeth as a base. But, four years ago, while on holiday in Dubai, he was elbowed in the face. The accident again shattered his already weak front teeth.

"There was blood everywhere," says Peter. "I couldn't believe it had happened again. The teeth were all loose and I was in agony when I touched them."

This time his teeth could not be repaired and Peter, from Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire, faced the prospect of having dentures for the rest of his life.

"They were a waste of time," he says. "They clipped in and I hated the way they felt - I constantly had a sore tongue. As soon as I got in from work I'd take them out but if anyone came to the door I had to rush upstairs and put them back in. It reminded me of my old granny, with her teeth in a glass."

In desperation, he returned to his dentist who agreed to fit posts to all that remained of his damaged teeth - by now small stumps. Crowns were attached to the posts but so little was left of Peter's own teeth that they constantly came loose.

"I couldn't bite into anything and I remember once losing a tooth on the pub floor," he says. "Another time I used superglue to carry out my own repairs until I could get to the dentist a few days later. I was in and out of there all the time."

Then, last year, Peter was shown an article about bone expansion and implants. He decided to have five implants fitted, to replace his two front teeth and three others.

In two treatments, three



PUTTING ON A HAPPY FACE: Peter Palmer says he doesn't regret spending £13,500 to get his teeth fixed

Picture: DAVID MARSDEN/Page One

Rebuilding my smile

months apart, Dr Ashish Parmar and Dr Rahul Doshi at the Perfect Smile studios in Hertford inserted a scalpel into the plates making up Peter's jaw bone. They used the scalpel to expand the jaw by pushing the bone apart.

"I was awake the whole time," says Peter. "It wasn't painful but it was weird to feel this constant tapping on my bone. I couldn't see what was going on but I could hear the dentist saying 'scalpel' to his assistant, which was a bit disconcerting."

IT took between four and six months for the implants to set, before crowns could be fitted. "I thought I could just grin and bear it for six months but after four it was driving me mad. I went back and, fortunately, they decided I was ready to have the crowns fitted," says Peter.

Three months later, and having spent £13,500 on the treatment, which is not available on the NHS, Peter has no regrets. "It's cost me an arm and a leg but it's worth every penny. I feel like I have my own, new teeth and everybody says how good they look. My wife, Lesley, is over the moon and I can eat anything

without worrying that they are going to fall out. I've been told they should last me for life."

It is estimated that more than one in four people over 60 has dentures, clipped in place around existing teeth. But some younger patients want an alternative.

"There is a stigma about taking your teeth out at night," says Dr Parmar. "For psychological and social reasons some people don't want to wear dentures."

If the entire root of the tooth is gone, or severely damaged, there is nothing to which to attach a crown. A bridge can also only be fitted if there are surrounding teeth to which it can be fixed.

Implants are an option but, when a tooth is lost, the surrounding jaw bone shrinks by 70 per cent within three months. Frequently, there is insufficient bone to which to anchor the implants. One technique involves grafting bone from the patient's chin or hip onto the jaw to create extra mass. A drill is then used to create space for implants, made from titanium, which are screwed, then stitched, into the bone.

A post is then fitted and a porcelain crown, which is a natural-looking false tooth, is glued in place. The process involves a general anaesthetic and, because the grafted bone has to heal, it can take up to 10

months. Bone expansion, when the implants are fitted at the same time, takes four months less.

THE procedure might seem gruesome but the jaw bone is relatively soft and can easily be manipulated, without causing pain. There is a risk of the jaw bone fracturing but a skilled surgeon should be able to avoid this.

"We open up the bone using the scalpel and other special instruments to make room for the implants," says Dr Parmar.

"It only needs to be stretched by a few millimetres. There is no need for grafting bone then waiting for it to heal. Also, a sedative is used rather than a general anaesthetic."

Only a handful of dentists carry out this procedure in the UK. According to the British Dental Health Foundation, 90 per cent of implants last for 15 years or more. Dentures have to be replaced about every five years.

● *The Perfect Smile Studios: 0845 600 8200. A single implant costs from £1,800 to £3,000. The British Dental Health Foundation's website www.dentalhealth.org.uk has information about implants.*



Jane Taylor
Personal trainer

Q MY HUSBAND died two-and-a-half years ago and I have had many emotional problems since. I have put on a lot of weight and keep eating for comfort. Because of my weight I have got very unfit. I am desperate to do something about it but can't get motivated.

A IT CAN be a long struggle to put your life back together after such an emotional catastrophe. If you have not already done so, you might consider bereavement counselling - there's no time limit on how long grieving lasts and even after quite a while it can help to talk to a sympathetic professional. Your GP should be able to give you contact details.

I mention this because you say you are "comfort eating" and it is a good idea to try to tackle the "comfort" bit (which is about your emotional upset) as well as the "eating" bit of the problem.

To lose the excess weight and get fit, you will need to eat differently and do more exercise. Use all the help you can to keep your motivation high. Join a

Weight Watchers group or team up with a friend who also seriously wants to shed the pounds. Many people find it easier to follow a set of rules and it's extremely useful to have someone to talk to in those moments when your resolve is wobbling.

Make yourself a few mini-goals every morning - just for that day. These should include a food goal and an activity/exercise goal. It's important to appreciate that by doing more you are using up calories, even if it's not "exercise". Whether it's amateur dramatics or language classes, bridge evenings or country dancing, doing more activity fills up time, takes your mind off your problems and energises you.

If you can afford it, hire a personal trainer for three months. This is the best possible way of keeping your exercise discipline and motivation high, giving you a terrific jump start. If that's not possible and the gym doesn't appeal, consider community exercise classes.

Your local council's leisure department or website should have details (including weight management classes). Swimming is another brilliant calorie-burner and gets you fit without making you feel really uncomfortable. You can tick off the lengths in the calming atmosphere of the pool.

Find reasons to go up and downstairs at home and walk every day (can you offer to walk a neighbour's dog?). Each day, make your goal just a little more demanding than the previous one.

Once you have worked out a routine for your exercise sessions (at least three a week), stick to it religiously and let nothing get in the way. Results will not come overnight, but they will happen. And, most importantly, if you lapse, wake up the next morning as though it didn't happen. No recriminations, no regrets - just keep on track and refuse to let little slip-ups knock you off course. Good luck.

● *Jane Taylor is a personal trainer who specialises in fitness for health. She works particularly with older people and those with illness and disabilities. To contact her, e-mail health@express.co.uk or write to Rachel Baird, The Northern & Shell Building, Number 10 Lower Thames Street, London EC3R 6EN.*



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