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Upgrade Your Smile

Implant surgery is now faster and less painful

By ARNOLD MANN

You usually have few good options for replacing your teeth. Either you use removable dentures or you undergo an expensive, long and painful procedure to install permanent dental implants. A new method takes a lot of the sting out of the implant process, although it still puts a hurt on your wallet.

Traditional dental implants aren't cheap, costing \$20,000 to \$25,000 for a full jaw — double that for uppers and lowers. More daunting is the ordeal, which can take a year or more of mouth surgeries.

The new Procera System, developed by Nobel Biocare, a leader in dental prosthetics, changes all that. The keys are software that makes it possible to design a patient's prosthesis in advance and a plastic surgical guide that fits over the gums and enables the surgeon to place the implants precisely without splaying open the gums, thus reducing healing time and the risk of infection. The surgery takes only an hour under local anesthesia. **"This is revolutionary," says Abraham Ingber of Bethesda, Md., one of 20 U.S. prosthodontists working with the system.** The company plans to launch Procera nationwide in the first quarter of 2005.

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The process works like this: a CT scan produces a 3-D image of the patient's jaw. That picture is sent to a lab, where the bridge is created along with the surgical guide. Everything needed for surgery goes back to the doctor in a kit, and the entire operation is planned beforehand, using the CT scan.

The dentist begins the implantation by screwing the surgical guide over the patient's gums. Then, going through holes in the guide, the dentist drills holes in the jawbone to receive the implants. When the surgical guide is removed, abutments are placed on the tops of the implants, and the final prosthesis is fixed to the abutments. The downside: this and other new

implant systems still cost about the same as traditional implants.

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