



Getting to the “Root” of Endodontic Therapy

Every day, many dental patients hear those dreaded words: “You need a root canal.” Just the phrase “root canal” has been known to make the strongest person quiver at the knees. But the truth is, more often than not, the anticipation of a root canal is far worse than the actual procedure. So, what exactly is a root canal and what can you expect from the procedure?

Endodontics, better known as root canal therapy, is a procedure that’s performed to save a tooth that would otherwise be extracted. If your dentist has informed you that you need endodontic treatment, you are not alone. More than 14 million teeth receive endodontic treatment each year. By choosing endodontic treatment, you are opting to keep your natural teeth as a healthy foundation for chewing and biting for years to come. Although many general dentists can perform root canal procedures, they may instead refer you to an endodontist, a dentist who specializes in root canal therapy.

Endodontic treatment is necessary when the tooth’s pulp becomes infected or inflamed. Pulp is found in a canal that runs through the center of the hard tissue on the inside of the tooth. The pulp carries the tooth’s nerves, blood vessels, and connective tissues. If the pulp becomes damaged through injury or disease, bacteria can leak into the pulp and cause it to die, according to the American Dental Association. The most common causes of pulp death are a cracked tooth or a deep cavity. Left without treatment, pus builds up at the root tip in the jawbone, forming an abscess.

Unfortunately, the tooth can not heal itself. That’s where the root canal comes in. Root canal therapy is the process of removing the diseased pulp tissue, disinfecting the canal, and then replacing the pulp with a filling material. The canal is filled with a rubberlike substance, called gutta-percha, or another material to prevent recontamination of the root. The tooth is then sealed with a post and/or a

crown. If the tooth is not treated, the infection can spread into the bone surrounding the tooth.

Root canal treatment frightens many people, but it shouldn’t. Endodontic concepts and techniques have undergone a multitude of changes in the past 20 years—and most likely will continue to evolve. With modern techniques, anesthetics, medications, and new products constantly being introduced in the field of dentistry, root canal procedures can be done more comfortably and in less time than in the past. Gone are the days of multiple painful visits; most treatments are completed in approximately one or two appointments, depending on the condition of the pulp.

During the first appointment, the endodontist will remove the diseased pulp, clean and shape the root, and then place a temporary filling in the crown opening to keep saliva out so that the area can heal properly. At the second appointment, the endodontist will remove the temporary filling and then fill and permanently seal the root canal.

Most patients report that they’re comfortable during and after the procedure. You can expect to have inflammation of the surrounding tissues and some discomfort, but an over-the-counter analgesic can help alleviate the pain, which should last for only a few days. A follow-up exam will ensure that your tissue is healing properly. Then, if your treatment is being performed by an endodontist, he or she will send you back to your general dentist to have a permanent restoration placed on the tooth.

Root canal therapy allows you to save your tooth—and your smile. 



For more information on root canals or your oral health, please contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit our Web site at www.massdental.org.