

ROOT CANAL: The More You Know

The words “root canal” have been known to strike fear in many a dental patient, and root canal therapy is probably the dental procedure that causes people the most anxiety. The root canal’s reputation is so negative that it’s become a go-to comic cliché for when you want to emphasize something you really don’t want to do (e.g., “I’d rather have a root canal than eat dinner with my in-laws again”). But the truth is that more often than not, the anticipation of a root canal is far worse than the actual procedure. The more you know about a root canal, the less frightened you’ll be if your dentist ever utters those words to you.

Root canal therapy—also known as endodontic treatment—is necessary when the tooth’s pulp becomes inflamed or infected. Pulp is the soft tissue inside teeth that carries the tooth’s nerves, blood vessels, and connective tissues. When the pulp becomes damaged through injury or disease, bacteria can leak into the pulp and cause it to die. If left untreated, the infection can spread, and the bone surrounding the tooth will degenerate until the tooth either falls out or has to be removed. According to the American Dental Association, common causes of infected pulp are:

- ◆ A deep cavity
- ◆ Repeated dental procedures
- ◆ A cracked or broken tooth
- ◆ Injury to the tooth (even if there’s not a visible crack or chip)

Root canals can be performed by your general dentist; however, your dentist may refer you to an endodontist, who is a dentist trained to treat the insides of teeth. During root canal treatment, your dentist or endodontist will remove the diseased pulp and replace it with a filling material. The pulp chamber and root canal(s) of the tooth are then cleaned and sealed, and the tooth is sealed with a post and/or crown. A crown is important because it protects the tooth from fracture.

In most cases, a root canal is a relatively simple procedure that can be performed in one to two visits with relatively minor discomfort. (Depending on the condition of the tooth, a third visit

may be required.) 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 crown placed on the tooth.

Now that you know a little bit more about what a root canal is and how it allows you to save not only your tooth but also your smile, maybe you won’t panic if you one day hear those dreaded words from your dentist.

