

What Is A Root Canal?



The prospect of undergoing a root canal is enough to flood many people with fear. Though we've learned to dread the very phrase, root canals are often highly successful dental procedures that are not any more uncomfortable than having a cavity filled.

Here's what to know about root canals, how the procedure works and who may need one.

What Is a Root Canal?

A root canal, or endodontic therapy is a standard dental procedure used to remedy an infection caused by a cavity or injury to the tooth. It can be performed by a general dentist or endodontist, and save your tooth from extraction by removing infected nerve tissue and bacteria from inside your tooth.

Who Needs a Root Canal?

You'll likely need a root canal when the inner layer of your tooth has deep decay.

"A tooth is essentially composed of three parts: enamel, dentin and then the pulp," says Alex Rubinov, D.D.S., Ph.D., a practicing dentist in New York City. "The pulp has a canal which allows the tooth to communicate with the body by way of fibers and blood vessels." A root canal is needed when the pulp is impacted by trauma or deep tooth decay, he explains.

While an X-ray will indicate if the pulp is infected and a root canal is necessary, common symptoms include:

- Sensitivity to hot or cold food or drinks
- Pain when chewing
- Loose tooth
- Swollen gums, cheek or jaw
- Tooth discoloration
- Discharge from tooth

What to Expect After a Root Canal

Immediately following a root canal, Dr. Rubinov describes the healing process as "amazing and instant," noting that many patients leave his office pain-free. However, if you suffered severe infection and swelling prior to the procedure, you may be put on antibiotics and pain-relieving medication such as ibuprofen for a few days, says Dr. Loetscher.

Most patients get mild symptoms, if any. One comparative study of 168 root canal patients in the *International Endodontic Journal* cited a pain level hovering just above one on a zero-to-10 scale. Researchers noted that 63% of participants recorded no anterior pain at all^[1].

While patients may feel a pinch when a needle pokes the gum around the affected tooth to numb it, "the actual root canal procedure is not painful," adds Dr. Rubinov. "The reason pain is associated is most commonly due to the sensitivity leading up to the procedure. A neglected infection can lead to swelling or an abscess, which is what causes the pain."

If the root canal was performed on a back tooth, you will require a crown, or tooth-like cap that supports a tooth after it has been weakened, explains Dr. Loetscher. "If you fail to have the tooth crowned it will split one day, requiring extraction."

What Happens If You Skip a Root Canal?

Declining a root canal procedure is not advisable, as you will need to address the infection in your tooth. Ignoring the issue, Dr. Khan says, often results in one of these scenarios:

- An abscess or infection spreading to other areas such as the jaw bone or sinuses
- Tooth loss

“Eventually the infection will worsen, likely having pain, bone loss and not a healthy situation,” adds Dr. Loetscher. “This typically occurs over the course of a few weeks.”

If you’re feeling nervous over an impending root canal, there are plenty of options to help make you more comfortable. For his patients, Dr. Rubinov leans on medications, like nitrous oxide to help ease anxiety, and things like noise-canceling headphones, eye masks and stress balls.