



A Root Canal? Oh No!

You have just seen your dentist and you get the most dreaded of all news...you need a root canal! What does that mean? Can't you just get the tooth extracted? You have heard bad things about root canals and you don't want any part of that! It is time to dispel the myths about root canals and seriously consider your options.

What is a root canal? A root canal is the process by which a dentist numbs the tooth, cleans out the pulp (nerve tissue) of a tooth, and replaces it with a synthetic material. This material is usually a rubber material called gutta percha. The cleaning out of the root gets rid of the live tissue and infection, sterilizing the canal processes. The filling up of the root seals it so no new tissue or infection can re-invade. There may be only one canal, as in a front tooth, or up to four, as in a molar (back tooth). In a normal tooth, this is a painless procedure and is no different to the patient than a long filling appointment. So what happened to these people who have these horror stories? What can go wrong?

The most important factor in getting a good root canal accomplished is effective anesthesia. If the procedure hurts, it is not numb. Sometimes when a tooth gets very infected (usually due to lack of regular dental care), the tooth becomes more difficult to numb. The anesthetic mixes with the infection and becomes a salt, rendering it ineffective. A way to avoid this is early treatment. If it is too late and abscess has already set in, a round of antibiotics before the procedure may be helpful. There are also many anesthetic techniques your dentist can use to get more profound anesthesia.

What about a tooth that was treated without pain, but the root canal failed years later? Usually the cause for this is inadequate cleansing and sealing of the tooth. With today's advanced technology, it is much easier for the dentist to get a good result when performing Endodontics (root canals). There are new devices to detect the canals and the end of the root. Also, cleaning and shaping can now be done with the dental handpiece instead of the old hand file technique. There are also devices to help the dentist more easily and effectively place the gutta percha. These technological advances all help the dentist do a more effective job of cleaning and filling the root canal system of the tooth. A clean and sealed root canal system means success. If done well, only a very few cases will fail over time, less than one percent.

What if I don't want a root canal? Isn't it cheaper just to extract? In the short term it is cheaper, yes. But something has to be done with the space, or the other teeth start to move into unwanted positions. An implant or bridge to replace the tooth is much more expensive than a root canal, and even more time spent in the dental chair. And how much is the function of your teeth worth to you? Not only does extraction make that tooth disappear, but it makes the opposing tooth on the other arch useless as well, significantly decreasing your chewing capabilities.

If you have a fear of root canals, talk to your dentist and let him/her dispel the myths for you. If you have confidence in your dentist, a root canal should be just another procedure to be accomplished in the preservation of oral health. If your root canal proves to be a difficult one, there are dentists out there who specialize only in root canals (Endodontists). But there is really no reason to avoid a procedure with little to no pain and great success that can ultimately save your tooth.

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