

Root canal treatment

Endodontics is the arm of dentistry concerned with the pulp – the soft tissue at the centre of each tooth. When people talk about endodontics, they're generally referring to a procedure known as root canal treatment.



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When is root canal treatment

The pulp consists of blood vessels, nerves and various other tissues, and is vital to your tooth's development during childhood. By the time we reach adulthood, the tooth has usually finished growing and the pulp starts to decrease in size. If the pulp becomes infected or contaminated by decay, you might start feeling some discomfort and treatment could be necessary.

Signs you may need treatment

The most obvious is your tooth really hurts! Always see a dental professional when experiencing a toothache. A few common warning signs may include:

- dull, throbbing pain – sometimes it can “radiate” and be difficult to pinpoint
- sharp pain when biting down or applying pressure
- tooth discolouration or darkening
- gum swelling or sensitivity

Not everyone experiences the same symptoms and the warning signs can be hard to spot on your own.

Don't ignore the symptoms

If you're experiencing any of the above symptoms, it's important to see a dentist. The pain may go away by itself, but it could also mean the pulp is dead and the nerves can no longer send pain signals. Most likely, the bacteria causing the infection could still be present. If left untreated, the bacteria can migrate to the jaw and gums and lead to a collection of pus inside or near the tooth, commonly called an “abscess.”

What's the procedure for treatment?

First, remove the infected or diseased pulp, along with any decayed sections. A very fine file is used to clean and shape the empty root canal. A disinfectant is then used to destroy any remaining bacteria, following the root canal being filled with a special material called “gutta-percha.”

In some cases, if the decay was extensive, you may need a dental crown.



An alternative to root canal treatment is extraction, followed by replacing the tooth with a bridge, an implant or dentures. But it's usually best to keep a natural tooth rather than replacing it.

Aftercare

There may be a little pain straight after the procedure but it should fade quickly. A regular routine of brushing and flossing is usually all you need to look after your treated tooth.

Does it hurt?

In the past, root canal treatments were often painful but these days, with modern anaesthesia and new endodontic technology, the procedure is typically less uncomfortable than it was.

How long does it last?

After treatment, the tooth should feel like it did before it became inflamed. It may seem strange, but a tooth without a pulp can still be functional and look normal. A treated tooth can last a lifetime, but this depends on an effective oral hygiene regimen and regular check-ups.