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Root Canal 101

There may come a time when you need to make a dental appointment because you're experiencing a lot of pain in one of your teeth. Your doctor may take a look and say, "you need a root canal."

Now, that phrase can sound awfully scary, especially if you're someone who has never heard of a root canal before and do not know anyone who has had one performed. The good news is that it's something not to be freaked out about -- root canals are a very normal procedure for dentists or endodontists to perform. In fact, more than 15 million root canals are performed each year, and over 41,000 are done every single day.

In this article we'll talk about why you might need a root canal, what happens during the procedure, and how to care for your tooth after it is completed.

Why Would I Need a Root Canal?

In its most basic definition a root canal is a type of medical treatment that is used when the inside of your tooth becomes damaged or infected.

Although what you only really see with your tooth is the hard outside -- called enamel -- the inside of a tooth is actually soft. This soft inside tissue is called the pulp, and it is made of blood vessels, connective tissue and nerves. The pulp and all of its features are what helps a tooth to grow. Once teeth reach maturity the pulp is not as important anymore.

Sometimes you may get a crack or hole in the enamel of your tooth -- maybe from an injury or a really big cavity -- and this can cause the pulp inside to get infected. If the pulp or the nerve of the tooth becomes really infected, this can cause quite a lot of pain and the only way to fix the problem is through a root canal.

How is a Root Canal Performed?

In its most simplistic form, a root canal procedure allows a dentist to open up the damaged tooth and clean out all the infected pulp and nerves that are in there. Then this cleaned area is filled and sealed with a rubbery material called gutta percha. Afterward, you will also receive a crown to be placed over the tooth to offer extra support and make it look like a natural tooth.

The good news is today's root canal is a pretty easy procedure and can normally be done in just a few hours and sometimes in only one appointment. Before the procedure the tooth is numbed, so you will not feel any pain. In fact, you may not feel anything at all!

How Should I Care for My Tooth After the Procedure?

If you had pain prior to the root canal it will hopefully be all or mostly gone once the root canal has been finished. The tooth may feel sensitive or sore after the procedure for a few days -- your dentist may prescribe some pain medication or suggest you take an over-the-counter pain medication.

For the most part, you can just go on with your daily life after a root canal, and can eat and drink without any issues. It is advisable, however, to try not to chew too much on the tooth that had the root canal until you have had your crown permanently affixed. The tooth will be fragile and you do not want to risk causing any more breakage or damage.

You can also feel at ease with jumping right back into your oral health care, including both brushing and flossing. With proper oral care, your tooth that received a root canal will last many years.

