

Before You Do the Root Canal

Here's the scenario:

You're in the dentist's office. You have a cavity. You're numb. The dentist starts the procedure drilling away the decay. He or she finds the decay hits the nerve. The next statement might be, "I'm sorry, but the decay has gone too deep. You need a root canal."

Here's another scenario:

Your dentist takes an x-ray. It might be a routine check, or you may have a toothache. He/She finds an abscess or a trapped infection that is located in the bone. It's plainly visible on the x-ray. He/She says, "You need a root canal."

On the inside of every tooth root, there is a hollow tube or canal. Inside that tube are small blood vessels that nourish the tooth and nerves that allow us to feel cold sensation. The blood vessels and nerves are sensitive to bacteria, so if a bacteria-filled cavity comes close to the nerve, you may feel some pain. That bacteria may also infect the blood vessels and nerves, causing them to die. That's where the term, "dead tooth," comes from. The bacteria doesn't just stay in the tooth. It can travel up through the canal and infect the bone that surrounds the tooth. A root canal procedure removes the nerve from the tooth, and cleans out the infection from within the tooth. It is very successful at controlling such infections.

So it would seem logical that if there is an infection in the tooth, or if decay has reached the nerve, that a root canal should be done. But hold on. Not so fast.

Root canal procedures are very successful, but the long-term success of the entire tooth has very much to do with the strength of the remaining tooth structure. In other words, if you have a tooth that has been badly broken down by decay or has substantial filling material in it, then that tooth is a weakened tooth. The more tooth structure that has been lost, the more decay that is in the tooth, the more filling material that is in the tooth, the weaker the tooth is. And the weaker the tooth is, the more it's prone to fracture.

There is one other factor involved. The blood vessels in the canal provide moisture to the tooth root. A tooth without those blood vessels becomes brittle. What happens when you lose moisture in your skin? That's right. It cracks. And a root canal treated tooth is exactly the same. While it does save the tooth, the tooth is more likely to crack.

Therefore, the question that you as an informed consumer should ask is, "How restorable is the tooth?" Is there sound, healthy tooth structure above the gum line? What are the chances that if I save the tooth with a root canal, that the tooth will remain sound?

If the tooth is not easily restorable, a dental implant is often the most reliable alternative.

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