Root Canal Therapy: What It Is and Why | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/root-canal-treatment-need/

Details:

Root canal therapy is a common treatment used when the pulp inside a tooth, the living part that contains nerves and blood vessels, has become inflamed or infected. Deep decay can allow bacteria to reach the pulp, and root canal treatment may be recommended to try to save the tooth rather than remove it. The treatment involves cleaning the inside of the tooth, filling the canal and sealing the tooth, often with a crown. At Core Dental, your dentist will examine your tooth and explain whether root canal treatment suits you.

What is root canal treatment and why is it needed?

The pulp is the living centre of a tooth. When decay is deep, it can cause inflammation of the nerve and let bacteria invade, which can lead to infection. Root canal therapy removes the damaged or infected pulp and cleans and seals the space so that the tooth may be kept in your mouth rather than extracted.

Whether the treatment is possible depends on your tooth. Root canal treatment is generally not feasible if there is not enough healthy tooth structure remaining to restore.

What treatment options are available for an infected tooth?

There are two main options to relieve pain and clear infection:

removing the tooth

saving the tooth with a root canal treatment and filling the space

Your dentist will explain the benefits, limitations and risks of each option for your situation. You can also read our comparison of root canal treatment or implants .

How do dentists test the health of a tooth?

To work out whether the pulp is healthy, your dentist may use:

radiographs (X-rays), to check for signs of infection

a cold test, where a cold instrument is applied to the tooth

a heat test, where heat is applied to the tooth

percussion, where the tooth is gently tapped

These tests help your dentist decide which tooth is the source of the problem and what treatment to recommend.

What does root canal treatment involve?

Treatment generally involves cleaning bacteria from the root canal system, filling the canal and sealing the tooth with a filling and usually a crown. It is typically spread over a number of appointments,

commonly two or three, and at least one X-ray is often taken at each visit.

A typical sequence looks like this:

Local anaesthetic is given so the area is numb.

The tooth is surrounded by a thin rubber sheet called a dental dam , which isolates it from bacteria and saliva in the rest of your mouth.

Decay and the inflamed or infected nerve are removed from the tooth.

The tooth is flushed out, which is called irrigation. Sometimes a medicine is placed inside and left for several weeks to reduce inflammation, with a temporary filling holding it in place.

The tooth is sealed with a permanent filling where the nerve used to be, to prevent leakage and bacteria re-entering.

A crown, sometimes called a cap, may be recommended to provide a long-lasting seal and extra strength and support.

The filling may be placed in the same appointment, or you may need another visit for the crown. Our page on what to expect from a root canal has more detail.

Will root canal treatment hurt afterwards?

After the first appointment you might feel some mild discomfort. This is often managed with over-the-counter pain relief, as advised by your dentist or pharmacist, and generally settles within about 48 hours. If your pain is severe or is getting worse, please contact us. We also have guidance on what to eat and drink after root canal treatment .

What symptoms might mean I need a root canal?

Symptoms that can point to a problem with the pulp include:

pain when eating or drinking hot or cold foods and drinks

pain when biting or chewing

in some cases, a tooth that feels loose

gum swelling

facial swelling

pus

the tooth becoming darker in colour

As an infection progresses, symptoms sometimes disappear because the pulp has died. This can make it seem as though the tooth has healed, when the infection may actually have spread through the root canal system. Further symptoms can appear later. For this reason, we recommend you see us promptly if you have any toothache, even if the pain settles. Please contact us for an emergency appointment, and see our emergency dentistry page.

Why try to save a tooth with root canal treatment?

Dentists generally try to keep natural teeth for as long as it is reasonable to do so, because a natural tooth can:

help you chew effectively

hold the position of the neighbouring teeth

avoid a visible gap between teeth

help the surrounding bone to be retained, rather than shrinking over time

A tooth that has had root canal treatment may still need monitoring, and results vary from person to person. Whether keeping the tooth is the right choice depends on its condition, and your dentist will discuss this with you.

Who provides root canal treatment at Core Dental?

Root canal treatment is part of our general dentistry services, so many of our dentists can assess your tooth. In some cases, a dentist may recommend a referral to a specialist endodontist. Read about endodontics for more information. Specialist availability varies by clinic, so please ask when you book.

How should I plan for treatment?

When you book, explain your symptoms, when they started and what you hope to achieve. Bring relevant medical information and a current medicines list. Your dentist can then assess your teeth, gums and bite, request X-rays where appropriate and explain your options. It helps to ask what the treatment is intended to achieve, what alternatives exist, what aftercare involves and what risks apply.

We quote before treatment starts, and we offer interest-free payment plans that allow you to spread the cost over time. Treatment time, fees and recovery vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. Do not wait for a dental appointment in those situations.

How can we help?

If you have a toothache or have been told you may need a root canal, our team can see you at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online. You can also learn what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment .

When is a root canal a specialist's case?

General dentists carry out root canal treatment routinely, and most cases are properly treated in general practice. Where a case is not, there is a recognised specialty for it, and a standard that decides when to use it.

Endodontics is one of the thirteen dental specialties in Australia approved by the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council and recognised by the Dental Board of Australia. Specialist registration in it requires a qualification in the specialty, all the requirements for general registration as a dentist, and "a minimum of two years general dental practice" — so a registered endodontist has worked as a general dentist before specialising. Where the qualification was obtained overseas and is not Board-approved, endodontics is among the specialties covered by the Board's qualification equivalence pathway.

The decision about who treats a given tooth is governed by the scope of practice standard. It requires that "dental practitioners must only perform dental treatment: a. for which they have been educated and trained, and b. in which they are competent." Competence is assessed case by case rather than held as a general credential, which matters in endodontics because the difficulty of a root canal is a property of the individual tooth: canals can be severely curved, calcified or hard to locate, root anatomy can be unusual, a previous root canal may not have resolved, and a crack may be suspected.

The standard also makes referral part of normal practice rather than an exception, describing dental practitioners as "members of the healthcare team" expected to "work with other members of the

healthcare team to provide the best possible care and outcome for their patients." And it applies the same limit to delegation: a practitioner "must not direct any person whether a registered dental practitioner or not to undertake dental treatment or give advice outside that person's education or competence."

The standard is binding rather than advisory. The Board notes that the National Law "establishes possible consequences if you don't meet this registration standard, including that registration standards, codes or guidelines may be used in disciplinary proceedings against health practitioners as evidence of what constitutes appropriate practice or conduct for the health profession (see section 41 of the National Law)."

If you want to confirm whether a practitioner holds specialist registration in endodontics, Ahpra publishes an online register of dental practitioners which records current registration status and the specialty of any dentist with specialist registration. Look the name up at ahpra.gov.au rather than relying on how a service is described.

Sources: Dental Board of Australia, Specialist Registration, dentalboard.gov.au (page reviewed 18 March 2025); Dental Board of Australia, Scope of practice registration standard, dentalboard.gov.au (effective 1 July 2020). Both accessed 3 November 2026.

What questions settle the choice between treating and extracting?

The page above sets out the clinical arguments. These are the questions that make the decision yours rather than something that happens to you.

What is the realistic chance this tooth survives treatment? A prognosis is an estimate, not a promise, and a clinician willing to put a range on it is giving you more than one who will not.

What does the tooth need afterwards, and is that in the quote? A root-treated tooth frequently needs a crown to protect it. The cost of the root canal alone is not the cost of finishing the job.

What would make you refer this case? The scope of practice standard requires the practitioner to have formed a view on their own competence for this tooth, so there is an answer to give.

If we extract instead, what replaces it and what does that cost? The comparison that matters is treatment against extraction plus replacement, not treatment against an empty space.

What happens if treatment is started and the tooth turns out to be worse than expected? This is not unusual, and how it is handled is better agreed before than discovered during.

There is no single right answer across patients. The combination of how much sound tooth remains, the state of the gums and bone around it, your medical history, what the tooth does in your bite, and what you want from it will point different ways for different people.

Frequently asked questions

Is root canal treatment painful?

Local anaesthetic is used to numb the area, so treatment itself should not be painful. Some mild discomfort afterwards is common and generally eases within about 48 hours. Tell your dentist straight away if you feel discomfort during the appointment.

How many appointments does root canal treatment take?

Treatment is typically spread over two or three appointments, although this varies with the tooth and the extent of infection. A crown may be recommended as a final step, which can mean another visit.

Can a tooth with a root canal treatment still need a crown?

Often, yes. A crown can protect the tooth, provide a long-lasting seal and give it extra strength and support. Your dentist will advise whether a crown is recommended for your tooth.

What happens if I leave an infected tooth untreated?

Infection can spread through the root canal system and into surrounding tissues, and symptoms may return or get worse. See your dentist promptly for a toothache, even if the pain has gone, so the cause can be found and treated.

Is it better to extract a tooth than to have a root canal?

It depends on the tooth. A natural tooth that can be restored is often worth keeping, but removal may be recommended if there is not enough healthy tooth structure. Your dentist will explain the options, including replacement choices.

Is endodontics a recognised specialty in Australia?

Yes. It is one of the thirteen dental specialties approved by the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council and recognised by the Dental Board of Australia. Specialist registration requires a qualification in the specialty, all the requirements for general registration as a dentist, and a minimum of two years general dental practice.

What makes a root canal a specialist case?

The difficulty is a property of the individual tooth rather than of the procedure. Canals can be severely curved, calcified or hard to locate, root anatomy can be unusual, a previous root canal may not have resolved, and a crack may be suspected. The Board's scope of practice standard requires practitioners to only perform treatment in which they are competent, and competence is assessed case by case.

How do I confirm someone is a registered endodontist?

Ahpra publishes an online register of dental practitioners which records current registration status and, for dentists holding specialist registration, the specialty concerned. Check at ahpra.gov.au rather than relying on how a service is described.

What should I ask before deciding between a root canal and extraction?

The realistic prognosis for the tooth; what it will need afterwards and whether that is included in the quote, since a root-treated tooth often needs a crown; what would prompt a referral; what the replacement option would cost if the tooth is removed instead; and what happens if treatment begins and the tooth proves worse than expected.

Can an overseas-qualified endodontist register here?

Endodontics is among the specialties covered by the Board's qualification equivalence pathway, which applies where a specialist qualification has not been approved by the Board.

Related services and further reading

Root canal therapy

Endodontics

Emergency dentistry

Dental crowns

What to expect from a root canal

What can I eat or drink after root canal treatment?

Root canal treatment or implants: which is better for me?

What is a dental dam?

Main symptoms and signs of toothache

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

Emergency appointments reserved daily where possible.

Interest-free payment plans and HICAPS on-site claiming.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What is the pulp of a tooth?

The pulp is the living part at the centre of a tooth, containing nerves and blood vessels. When deep decay inflames or infects it, Core Dental dentists may discuss root canal treatment as a way to try to keep the tooth.

How do dentists check whether a tooth needs a root canal?

Core Dental dentists may use X-rays to look for infection, cold and heat tests and gentle tapping of the tooth. These tests help show whether the pulp is healthy and which tooth is the source of your pain.

What are the stages of root canal treatment?

Treatment usually involves numbing the area, isolating the tooth with a dental dam, removing infected pulp, cleaning and sealing the canal, then placing a permanent filling and often a crown. At Core Dental it is commonly spread over two or three visits.

Why do tooth symptoms sometimes disappear before treatment?

As infection progresses the pulp can die, so pain may ease even though infection is spreading through the root canal system. Core Dental recommends an examination for any toothache, even if the pain has settled.

What are the reasons to keep a natural tooth with a root canal?

A natural tooth can support chewing, hold neighbouring teeth in position, avoid a visible gap and help the surrounding bone to be retained. Core Dental dentists will tell you whether saving your tooth is suitable.

How long does discomfort last after the first root canal visit?

Some mild discomfort is common after the first appointment and generally eases within about 48 hours, often managed with over-the-counter pain relief. Contact Core Dental if your pain is severe or getting worse.

Can I get an urgent appointment at Core Dental for a toothache?

Core Dental reserves emergency appointments where possible. Call 13 13 16 and describe your symptoms. Call 000 for uncontrollable bleeding, serious facial injury or difficulty breathing or swallowing.

How do I book a root canal assessment at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. Tell our team about your symptoms and bring your medical information and medicines list so the dentist can plan your examination and X-rays.