Root Canal Treatment or Implants: Your Options | Core Dental

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Details:

When a tooth becomes inflamed, infected or painful, the two main options a dentist may discuss are root canal treatment, which aims to save the natural tooth, or removing the tooth and replacing it, often with a dental implant. Neither option is right for everyone. The suitable choice depends on how much healthy tooth structure remains and the long-term outlook for that tooth. At Core Dental, our dentists examine your tooth, explain your options and help you decide.

Why might a tooth become inflamed, infected or painful?

A tooth can become inflamed, infected and painful for two common reasons. The first is infection, which can result from decay or gum disease. The second is dental trauma, such as an injury while playing sport. Pain, swelling, sensitivity to hot or cold, or a bad taste can all be signs that something needs attention, so please book an appointment promptly. See our page on emergency dentistry if you have severe pain or swelling.

What happens when a tooth is inflamed, infected or painful?

Your dentist will examine the tooth, usually take an X-ray, and discuss treatment options with you. The two main options are usually root canal treatment, or removal and replacement of the affected tooth. Which is suitable depends on the condition of the tooth and the surrounding bone and gum.

What is root canal treatment designed to do?

Root canal treatment, also called endodontic treatment, is designed to save the natural tooth when it has become inflamed, infected or painful. It is indicated when infection has spread to the innermost part of the tooth, called the pulp, which contains nerve tissue and blood vessels and runs in thin canals down the length of the root.

The treatment involves removing the infected pulp, cleaning the canal system and placing filling material in the space as a seal against bacteria. Teeth that have been root canal treated are often restored with a crown, or cap, made of ceramic or metal to protect them. You can read more about root canal therapy , and we have a guide to what to expect from a root canal .

What are the benefits of root canal treatment?

Where it is appropriate, root canal treatment may allow you to keep your natural tooth, which helps to maintain its function and appearance. It can relieve pain caused by infection or inflammation, and a treated and restored tooth can give many years of normal use. Success depends on the tooth and how well it can be restored, and a dentist cannot guarantee an outcome. Retaining natural tooth structure wherever possible is generally preferred.

When might a dentist suggest an implant instead?

In some situations root canal treatment is not possible, or the tooth is broken or damaged beyond repair. In these cases your dentist may suggest removing the tooth and replacing it with an implant.

An implant consists of a titanium fixture that is inserted into the jawbone, and is similar to material used in hip or knee replacements. It is then restored with a prosthetic crown that mimics the appearance of a natural tooth. Suitability depends on your jawbone, gum health and general health. Learn more about dental implants at Core Dental.

Which option should I choose?

Each option has its applications, so there is no single answer that fits everyone. There may be a more suitable option for your particular case. Your dentist can discuss your options at length once they have assessed your situation carefully and considered the long-term outlook of the affected tooth.

At Core Dental our aim is to maintain function and appearance and to relieve pain. Wherever possible, conserving natural tooth structure is a priority. If that is not possible, many rehabilitative options exist, and our team can talk you through them. Where a case is complex, our general dentists can work with our registered specialists, such as endodontists. See our page on dentists and registered specialists .

How should I plan my care and prepare for a consultation?

A useful first step is to explain your concern, symptoms, timing and treatment goals when you book. Bring relevant medical information and a current medicines list. Your dentist can then assess the teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, request imaging when clinically appropriate, and explain which options are suitable.

Ask what the recommended approach is intended to achieve, whether there are reasonable alternatives, what preparation and aftercare involve, and what risks or limitations apply. Treatment time, fees, recovery and maintenance vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care. A written treatment plan can help you compare stages, expected appointments and payment arrangements before you proceed.

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

Which specialties sit behind each option?

The choice on this page is between saving a tooth and replacing it. Each path has its own recognised specialty behind it, and knowing which is which makes a referral easier to interpret.

The Dental Board of Australia recognises thirteen dental specialties in Australia, approved by the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council.

On the side of saving the tooth: endodontics. This is the specialty concerned with the inside of the tooth and the tissues around its root. A referral to an endodontist is what happens when a root canal case is more complex than routine — curved, calcified or hard-to-locate canals, unusual root anatomy, a previous root canal that has not resolved, or a suspected crack.

On the side of replacing it: four specialties can be involved. Oral and maxillofacial surgery and oral surgery cover the surgical work; periodontics covers the gums and the bone supporting an implant; prosthodontics covers the restoration placed on it. Oral and maxillofacial surgery is the one unusual entry: the Board states it "is a specialty recognised by both the Dental Board of Australia and the Medical Board of Australia", and that "you must hold qualifications in both medicine and dentistry."

Every one of these requires, as a condition of specialist registration, a qualification in the specialty, all the requirements for general registration as a dentist, and "a minimum of two years general dental practice."

Note what is absent from the list: there is no implant specialty. No practitioner holds specialist registration in implants as such, so the credential some patients look for does not exist in that form. Ahpra's register records the specialty of any dentist who does hold specialist registration, and can be checked at ahpra.gov.au.

Source: Dental Board of Australia, Specialist Registration, dentalboard.gov.au (page reviewed 18 March 2025; accessed 3 November 2026).

How is the decision bounded by what a practitioner may do?

A recommendation between two treatments is not made in the abstract. It is made by a particular clinician, within limits the regulator sets.

The Dental Board's scope of practice registration standard 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 in that formulation is assessed case by case, not held as a general credential — so a clinician comfortable with a straightforward root canal may properly refer a difficult one, and the same clinician may place some implants and refer others.

This has a consequence worth naming plainly: the range of options a clinician presents can be shaped by what they themselves do. That is not a criticism of anyone. It follows from a standard that requires practitioners to work inside their own competence. But it is a reason to ask what the alternatives are, including any that would mean seeing someone else.

The standard anticipates exactly that. It describes all dental practitioners as "members of the healthcare team" who "are expected to work with other members of the healthcare team to provide the best possible care and outcome for their patients", and it bars delegating beyond anyone's competence: 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."

Three questions follow from it, and none of them should cause offence.

What are all the options for this tooth, including ones you would refer?

What is your own assessment of the chance this tooth survives treatment, and on what does that depend?

If we save it, what does it need afterwards and is that in the quote? A root-treated tooth frequently needs a crown, and the comparison that matters is treatment-plus-crown against extraction-plus-replacement, not one procedure against the other.

Source: Dental Board of Australia, Scope of practice registration standard, dentalboard.gov.au (effective 1 July 2020; accessed 3 November 2026).

Frequently asked questions

Is root canal treatment painful?

Your dentist will use local anaesthetic so you should not feel pain during the procedure. Some tenderness afterwards is common and usually settles, and we will explain aftercare. Contact us if pain worsens or does not settle.

Can a tooth with an infection be saved?

Often it can, if enough healthy tooth structure remains and the tooth can be restored, but this varies. Your dentist will examine and X-ray the tooth to see whether root canal treatment is suitable.

Does a root canal treated tooth need a crown?

Teeth that have had root canal treatment are often restored with a crown to protect them, but this depends on how much natural tooth structure is left. Your dentist can advise on the right restoration for your tooth.

How long does an implant take compared with a root canal?

Timing varies. A root canal is usually completed over one or more visits, while an implant involves removing the tooth, healing and then placing the implant and crown. Your dentist can outline the stages for your situation.

Can I eat normally after a root canal?

Your dentist will give instructions after treatment, which usually involve waiting until the anaesthetic wears off and being gentle on the tooth. See our article on what to eat or drink after root canal treatment .

Which specialty handles complex root canal work?

Endodontics, one of the thirteen dental specialties recognised by the Dental Board of Australia. A referral usually reflects complexity in the individual tooth — curved, calcified or hard-to-locate canals, unusual root anatomy, a previous root canal that has not resolved, or a suspected crack.

Which specialties are involved on the implant side?

Four of the thirteen can be: oral and maxillofacial surgery and oral surgery for the surgical work, periodontics for the gums and supporting bone, and prosthodontics for the restoration placed on the implant. There is no implant specialty, so no practitioner holds specialist registration in implants as such.

Could the options I am offered depend on who I am seeing?

It can, and it is worth knowing why. The Board's scope of practice standard requires practitioners to only perform treatment for which they have been educated and trained and in which they are competent, assessed case by case. A clinician working properly inside that limit may refer what another would treat. Asking what all the options are, including any that would mean seeing someone else, is a reasonable question.

What is the fair cost comparison between the two paths?

Treatment plus what the tooth needs afterwards, against extraction plus replacement. A root-treated tooth frequently needs a crown, so comparing the root canal fee alone against an implant fee understates one side. Ask what is included in each quote.

Why does a dentist require qualifications in medicine for oral and maxillofacial surgery?

Because that specialty is recognised by both the Dental Board of Australia and the Medical Board of Australia, and the Board states a practitioner must hold qualifications in both medicine and dentistry. It is the only one of the thirteen specialties with that dual requirement.

Related services and further reading

Root canal therapy

Dental implants

Conventional implants

Endodontics

Dental crowns

Emergency dentistry

What to expect from a root canal

What can I eat or drink after root canal treatment

General tooth extraction

How can we help?

If you have a painful or infected tooth, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental practices, and we reserve emergency appointments where possible. Call 13 13 16 or book online so your dentist can examine the tooth and explain your options. You can also read what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment .

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.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, 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 root canal treatment?

Root canal treatment, also called endodontic treatment, removes infected pulp from inside a tooth, cleans the canals and seals them with filling material. Core Dental dentists use it where appropriate to save a natural tooth.

What can cause a tooth to need a root canal?

Infection from decay or gum disease, or dental trauma such as a sports injury, can inflame or infect a tooth. Core Dental dentists examine the tooth and take imaging to see what treatment may suit you.

When might a tooth be removed and replaced with an implant?

If a tooth cannot be treated by root canal, or is broken or damaged beyond repair, a dentist may suggest removing it and placing an implant. Core Dental dentists assess this at an examination.

What is a dental implant made of?

A dental implant is a titanium fixture placed in the jawbone and restored with a prosthetic crown that mimics a natural tooth. Core Dental dentists check bone and gum health to see whether an implant may suit you.

Is a crown usually placed after a root canal?

Teeth that have had root canal treatment are often protected with a ceramic or metal crown, depending on how much natural tooth remains. Core Dental dentists advise on the restoration for your tooth.

Does Core Dental work with specialists on complex root canal cases?

Core Dental general dentists can work with registered specialists, such as endodontists, where a case is complex. Availability varies by clinic, so ask our team when you book.

How soon should I book if my tooth is painful?

Book promptly if a tooth is painful, swollen or infected. Core Dental reserves emergency appointments where possible. Call 13 13 16, and call 000 for breathing or swallowing difficulty or uncontrolled bleeding.

Does Core Dental offer payment plans for root canal or implant treatment?

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming. Confirm current terms, inclusions and any health fund rebate with Core Dental before booking.