What to Expect From a Root Canal Procedure | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/what-to-expect-from-a-root-canal/

Details:

Root canal treatment, also called endodontic treatment, is a procedure used to try to save a tooth that would otherwise need to be removed. It is typically recommended for teeth that are badly decayed, broken or infected, which can cause strong pain. During treatment the dentist removes the affected nerve tissue from inside the tooth, cleans the canals and seals them. It usually takes between one and three sessions. At Core Dental our dentists explain each step before we start, so you know what to expect.

What is root canal treatment, and what else is it called?

Root canal treatment is also known as endodontic treatment. It is a procedure that aims to save a tooth that would otherwise need to be extracted. By treating the inside of the tooth, it may be possible to keep your natural tooth in place and keep chewing comfortably. Your dentist will first assess whether the tooth can be saved.

Why would a tooth need root canal treatment?

Root canal treatment is typically needed when a tooth is badly decayed, broken or infected. In these cases the nerve tissue inside the tooth can become inflamed or infected, which can cause strong pain in the affected area. Some teeth with damaged nerves cause little pain, so a dentist may find the problem on an X-ray or at a check-up. If you have a toothache, swelling, or pain that lingers with hot or cold, it is sensible to see a dentist promptly.

What is the main purpose of root canal treatment?

The main purpose is to remove the nerve tissue from inside the tooth, so that the tooth no longer causes pain and the infection is dealt with. Once treated, the tooth no longer has a working nerve, but it can usually stay in the mouth and continue to be used. Teeth that have had root canal treatment may be more brittle, so a crown is often recommended afterwards to protect them.

What are the main stages of a root canal procedure?

Treatment is usually carried out under local anaesthetic, so you should not feel pain during the procedure. It has three main phases:

Access phase. The dentist makes a small opening in the top of the tooth to reach the root canals.

Removal phase. The affected pulp, which is the soft tissue inside the tooth, is removed, and the canals are cleaned and irrigated with an antibacterial preparation.

Fill phase. The canals are filled with a synthetic material that provides a seal.

After the final stage the tooth is restored, often with a filling or a crown, depending on how much healthy tooth remains.

How many sessions does root canal treatment usually take?

The entire treatment typically spans between one and three sessions. The number of visits depends on the tooth, how many canals it has, whether infection is present and how complex the case is. Your dentist will give you an idea of the likely number of appointments at the start.

What should you ask your dentist before root canal treatment?

A useful first step is to explain your symptoms, when they started and what you have noticed. Bring relevant medical information and a list of your current medicines. It is reasonable to ask what the treatment is intended to achieve, whether there are alternatives such as removing the tooth, what the aftercare involves, and what risks or limitations apply. Fees, recovery and maintenance vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care, and a written treatment plan can help you compare stages, expected appointments and payment arrangements before you proceed.

What happens after root canal treatment?

You may have some tenderness for a short time after treatment, and your dentist will explain how to care for the tooth and when you may eat normally. Our article on what you can eat or drink after root canal treatment gives general guidance. If you have severe pain, swelling or a fever, contact the practice promptly. Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, difficulty breathing or swallowing, or a serious facial injury.

How can we help?

If you have a painful, broken or infected tooth, our team can examine it and explain your options at any of our nine Core Dental practices. Call 13 13 16 or book online. Some patients may be referred for specialist endodontic care, and we can talk through whether that suits your case. Core Dental offers interest-free payment plans and we quote before treatment starts.

Further detail from Core Dental

The following points are drawn from Core Dental's own published material on this topic. They are included here for completeness, and anything that applies to your own treatment should be confirmed with your clinician.

Next, the nerve chamber is emptied and then cleaned using an antiseptic solution. For this shaping process, we may use a machine, hand instruments or a combination of the two. We use a different machine, or an X-ray, to precisely measure the length of the root and hence its filling. An X-ray is taken to verify that the root or roots has/have been completely filled.

We again place a filling on top and wait a few weeks to ensure that the tooth settles down completely.

The four aims of the treatment, in the Department's own words

Root canal treatment is usually described by how it feels rather than by what it is doing. The state health advice sets out four aims in sequence, and knowing them explains why it can take more than one visit.

The Victorian Department of Health's four aims, verbatim:

1. "Removing active decay and infection - any old or leaky fillings, tooth decay, infected nerve tissue, pus and debris are removed."
2. "Shaping the canals - to be filled well, the canals within the tooth root need to be shaped into smooth, hollow tunnels that are free of irregularities where residual bacteria may sit. This shaping process involves small instruments, special disinfectants and medication. It may take a few weeks to months for these solutions to take maximum effect against stubborn bacteria within the tooth, and this step may have to be repeated several times."

This is where the time goes. The Department says plainly that the disinfecting step "may take a few weeks to months" to take maximum effect and "may have to be repeated several times". A treatment spread over appointments is the published norm, not a sign anything has gone wrong.

1. "Filling the canals - to prevent bacteria from re-infecting the empty canals in your tooth, they are permanently sealed with a long-lasting barrier material."
2. "Making the tooth functional again - to make sure no bacteria from the mouth can leak back into the tooth, a large, well-sealed restoration is put on the tooth. Teeth that require root canal treatment have sometimes lost a lot of tooth structure due to previous decay or cracks and may require further protection in the form of posts, crowns or other similar materials."

So the final restoration is part of the treatment rather than an optional extra, and for a tooth that has lost a lot of structure the Department names posts and crowns specifically.

On how many visits. "You may need more than one visit to complete the treatment, depending on the difficulty of the procedure. The exact procedure chosen by your dentist may differ from the procedure outlined here."

And what decides the difficulty. "Generally, front teeth have only one root, while molars generally have up to three. Within each root, there can be multiple canal spaces." The images are part of the planning: x-rays "help the dentist to plan for the root canal treatment by showing the number, size, shape and depth of the roots, which shows how complicated the procedure may be."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025). Accessed 6 November 2026.

What the success rate actually measures, and who does the work

There is a published success figure for root canal treatment, and it is worth quoting precisely because its outcome measure is narrower than people assume.

The Department: "Success rates for endodontic treatment are generally high. About 90 to 95 per cent of people who undergo root canal treatment can expect a functional tooth after the treatment."

A functional tooth. That is the stated measure — not freedom from pain, not the tooth never needing anything again. It is a high figure for a well-defined outcome, and it should be read as that rather than as a general guarantee.

On how long the tooth lasts afterwards , the Department is conditional rather than numeric: "The treated tooth should last a very long time, provided that you maintain good oral hygiene, avoid consuming too much sugar and have regular dental check ups." And it adds the honest comparison: "Of course, no therapy or replacement will last as well as a healthy tooth."

Why a tooth survives without its pulp at all. "The main function of the dental pulp is to regulate the growth and development of the tooth during childhood. Once the tooth is fully formed, nutrition for the tooth comes from the tissues surrounding the root. Therefore, a tooth can function without its pulp and, in most cases, can be kept indefinitely."

What happens if the infection is left instead. "Once the pulp becomes infected, it loses its ability to fight the spread of the infection. If bacteria find their way into the pulp chamber, the bacteria will multiply. This can cause an infection or an endodontic abscess (a pocket or 'blister' of pus) when it spreads into the surrounding bone which can become severe."

Its listed complications include "bone loss in the area - the infection may spread around the ends of the infected root canal and erode surrounding jawbone", and "loss of tooth - the tooth may have to be removed, which can affect eating or appearance. Tooth replacement options are available but may be limited if the infection has already caused advanced bone loss."

That last clause is the strongest argument for not delaying: the replacement options narrow as the bone goes.

The symptoms that bring people in , verbatim: "unprovoked or spontaneous pain"; "sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods"; "pain when biting or chewing"; "loosening of the tooth"; "swelling of the gum near the affected tooth"; "oozing of pus surrounding the affected tooth"; "facial swelling".

And the ones that bring nobody in. "Sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms. In these cases, the problem is usually diagnosed by special tests or x-rays during a dental check-up or treatment for other dental concerns."

On who performs it. "All dentists are trained to carry out root canal treatments. Some dentists will refer complicated and emergency cases to an endodontist once your tooth has been assessed. Endodontists are dentists who are specialists in root canal treatment." And you can ask: "If you would like a specialist opinion, ask your dentist for a referral to an endodontist."

Endodontics is one of the "13 dental specialties in Australia which are approved by the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council", and Ahpra's register "includes details of the specialty or specialties for dentists who hold specialist registration" — so specialist status is verifiable.

One cosmetic consequence to know in advance. "A normal tooth with a healthy pulp is yellowish-white in colour. A pulp-free tooth that is sealed with a filling rather than covered by a crown may eventually turn grey." The Department notes that "the dentist can advise you on appropriate aesthetic (cosmetic dentistry) procedures to help with this", and elsewhere describes internal whitening as "specifically for teeth that have discoloured after root canal treatment".

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025); Cosmetic dentistry and teeth whitening, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 12 December 2025); Dental Board of Australia, Specialist Registration, dentalboard.gov.au (the page states it was reviewed 18/03/2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Does a root canal hurt?

Root canal treatment is done under local anaesthetic, so you should not feel pain during it. Some tenderness afterwards is possible. The treatment is meant to relieve the pain caused by an inflamed or infected nerve.

Can a tooth be saved without root canal treatment?

Sometimes, depending on how far decay or damage has reached. If the nerve inside the tooth is badly affected, root canal treatment or extraction is usually needed. A dentist can assess which option suits you.

Will I need a crown after a root canal?

A tooth that has had root canal treatment can be more brittle, so a crown is often recommended to protect it. Your dentist will assess how much healthy tooth remains before advising you.

Is root canal treatment the same as endodontic treatment?

Yes. Endodontic treatment is the dental term for root canal treatment. It deals with the nerve tissue and canals inside the tooth.

What happens if I leave an infected tooth untreated?

An infection can spread and cause swelling and increasing pain, and the tooth may eventually be lost. See a dentist promptly if you have a toothache or swelling, and call 000 for any serious symptoms.

Why does root canal treatment sometimes take several visits?

Because of the disinfecting stage. The Victorian Department of Health: shaping the canals "involves small instruments, special disinfectants and medication. It may take a few weeks to months for these solutions to take maximum effect against stubborn bacteria within the tooth, and this step may have to be repeated several times." It also notes that "you may need more than one visit to complete the treatment, depending on the difficulty of the procedure".

What makes one tooth harder than another?

The roots. "Generally, front teeth have only one root, while molars generally have up to three. Within each root, there can be multiple canal spaces." X-rays "help the dentist to plan for the root canal treatment by showing the number, size, shape and depth of the roots, which shows how complicated the procedure may be."

What is the success rate?

"About 90 to 95 per cent of people who undergo root canal treatment can expect a functional tooth after the treatment." Note the measure: a functional tooth, not freedom from pain or a tooth that never needs anything again.

How long will the tooth last?

The Department's answer is conditional rather than numeric: "The treated tooth should last a very long time, provided that you maintain good oral hygiene, avoid consuming too much sugar and have regular dental check ups." It adds: "Of course, no therapy or replacement will last as well as a healthy tooth."

Can a tooth really work without its pulp?

Yes. "Once the tooth is fully formed, nutrition for the tooth comes from the tissues surrounding the root. Therefore, a tooth can function without its pulp and, in most cases, can be kept indefinitely."

What happens if I leave it?

The infection spreads. "Once the pulp becomes infected, it loses its ability to fight the spread of the infection", which can cause "an endodontic abscess (a pocket or 'blister' of pus) when it spreads into the surrounding bone which can become severe." Listed complications include bone loss where "the infection may spread around the ends of the infected root canal and erode surrounding jawbone", and loss of the tooth — with the warning that "tooth replacement options are available but may be limited if the infection has already caused advanced bone loss."

What symptoms suggest the pulp is involved?

The Department's list: "unprovoked or spontaneous pain"; "sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods"; "pain when biting or chewing"; "loosening of the tooth"; "swelling of the gum near the affected tooth"; "oozing of pus surrounding the affected tooth"; "facial swelling".

Can it happen with no symptoms at all?

Yes. "Sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms. In these cases, the problem is usually diagnosed by special tests or x-rays during a dental check-up or treatment for other dental concerns."

Will the tooth need a crown afterwards?

It may. The Department's fourth aim notes that teeth needing root canal treatment "have sometimes lost a lot of tooth structure due to previous decay or cracks and may require further protection in the form of posts, crowns or other similar materials".

Do I need a specialist?

Not necessarily. "All dentists are trained to carry out root canal treatments. Some dentists will refer complicated and emergency cases to an endodontist once your tooth has been assessed. Endodontists are dentists who are specialists in root canal treatment." And you can ask: "If you would like a specialist opinion, ask your dentist for a referral to an endodontist."

Will the tooth change colour?

It can. "A pulp-free tooth that is sealed with a filling rather than covered by a crown may eventually turn grey." The Department notes that "the dentist can advise you on appropriate aesthetic (cosmetic dentistry) procedures to help with this", and describes internal whitening as "specifically for teeth that have discoloured after root canal treatment".

Related services and further reading

Root canal therapy

Endodontics

Emergency dentistry

Dental crowns

What can I eat or drink after root canal treatment?

Root canal treatment or implants: choosing what suits you

Dental implants or root canal treatment

Do I need root canal treatment?

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, with Monday to Friday hours to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through your practice page, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, Sunday closed

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. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What is endodontic treatment?

Endodontic treatment is another name for root canal treatment, a procedure to treat the inside of a badly decayed, broken or infected tooth so it may be saved. Core Dental dentists assess your tooth first.

Why might a Core Dental dentist recommend root canal treatment?

We may recommend it when a tooth is badly decayed, broken or infected and the nerve inside is inflamed or infected, often causing strong pain. An examination and X-ray help confirm whether it is needed.

What is the aim of removing the nerve from a tooth?

Removing the affected nerve tissue means the tooth no longer causes pain from that nerve, and the infection is cleaned out. Core Dental dentists then seal the canals so the tooth may stay in your mouth.

What are the three phases of root canal treatment?

The access phase opens the top of the tooth to reach the canals, the removal phase takes out the affected pulp and cleans the canals, and the fill phase seals them with synthetic material.

How many appointments does a root canal need at Core Dental?

Root canal treatment typically takes between one and three sessions, depending on the tooth and whether infection is present. Your Core Dental dentist will give you an estimate at your assessment.

Is local anaesthetic used for root canal treatment?

Yes, treatment is usually done under local anaesthetic so you should not feel pain during it. Tell the Core Dental team if you feel anxious or uncomfortable, and we will explain each step.

What care does a tooth need after root canal treatment?

The tooth is often restored with a filling or crown, and it still needs brushing, cleaning between teeth and regular check-ups. Your Core Dental dentist will explain aftercare and when you can eat normally.

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

Call 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. Core Dental clinics are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, and emergency appointments may be available, so call early.