

Root Canals Revisited...

It seems that one of the worst phrases that we dentists can utter is, "Well, ma'am, it seems that tooth is going to need a root canal..."

Rarely can I finish my explanation before I see the white knuckles and dental fear set in. That certainly is never my intention. To be honest, I believe that root canals generally have a worse reputation than they deserve. A few years back, I remember reading a scientific study about the public's perception of dentists. I don't remember the details, but the main point was that we dentists aren't generally bad people; we're just played that way on film. Why money was spent to study this dilemma is a whole other question.

Root canal therapy (RCT for short) has a similar reputation. The purpose of a root canal, along with every other procedure that we do, is to prevent disease and to get people out of pain. Let me repeat that...root canals get people out of pain. If we can emphasize that little fact, maybe we can help clean up Mr. RCT's reputation.

So why do teeth need root canal therapy? To summarize, a root canal is required to save a tooth when the nerve of that tooth has been injured beyond your body's ability to repair itself. In other words, a cavity, crack, or some other trauma has injured the nerve of the tooth beyond repair. Generally, the pain of that toothache comes from your body's actual response to the trauma...swelling. Swelling inside of an enclosed space, like a tooth, tends to do more damage than good and, as an added bonus, tends to be darn painful.

So what does a root canal do? A root canal simply removes all of the nerve tissue, blood vessels, bacteria, and debris from the nerve chamber of the tooth. After becoming completely numb, a prerequisite to any comfortable dental procedure, your dentist will use a combination of mechanical debridement and antibiotic solutions to clean out your tooth. After this cleaning and shaping of the nerve chamber (some teeth can have up to four or five different nerve canals), the tooth root is sealed up to prevent bacteria from getting back in.

The final step is to restore your tooth to its former glory. On front teeth, this can sometimes be done with something as simple as a tooth colored filling where the nerve was removed. Back teeth almost always have to have a cap or crown to seal them off because they become brittle once their nerves and blood vessels have been cleaned out. Either way, your tooth can usually be pain free and looking as good as ever, sometimes in a single visit. Hopefully, it wasn't as bad as you might have heard on TV.

Until next time, keep smiling.

-Questions or comments can be sent to Drs. Parrish at ParrishDental@aol.com. Thanks.