

# Mouth Matters

Dorion on Dentistry

## Protecting Root Canal Treated Teeth



When a tooth has abscessed, become irreversibly inflamed or if damage from a cavity or trauma has extended into the pulp tissue, there are only two possible treatment options. Either the entire tooth must be removed, or the pulp tissue from inside the tooth must be removed. The second option, which allows us to retain the tooth, is called root canal therapy.

Statistically, a properly restored tooth that has had root canal therapy has a very good long-term prognosis. In a large scale 2004 study published in the *Journal of Endodontics*, 97% of the 1.6 million patients followed had continued to retain their root canal treated teeth 8 years following the procedure.

Yet we hear about and see patients all the time who have lost a tooth that had previously been root canal treated. When these folks are faced with the prospect of having a root canal they now have good reason for

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being skeptical about accepting this treatment. They are convinced that since extraction is eventually inevitable

they might as well get it over with now.

When someone reports a history of losing a root canal treated tooth the next question I always ask is: "Was it the root canal that failed, or did the tooth break down and fracture?" In almost every case the reason the tooth failed was because it split, or the tooth crumbled and fell apart.

You'll notice that earlier I stated that a "properly restored" tooth that has had root canal therapy has a very good long term prognosis. Besides the quality of the

root canal treatment itself, the quality of the restoration placed on top of the tooth is equally as important to success.

When a tooth has had root canal treatment a significant amount of tooth structure is lost in the process leaving the tooth hollow and thus much weaker. For this reason whenever we do this to a tooth it is important to cap it afterwards to protect it from cracking and breaking down under the loads and strains of daily use.

There are two ways to cap a tooth. One is to place a filling that covers the entire biting surface of the tooth and the other is to place a metal or ceramic crown which caps the entire tooth. Either can work well to protect the tooth, but a crown is generally considered the better of the two choices since they are stronger and tend to last longer than large fillings.

For back teeth like molars and bicuspids, a conventional filling that does not cover all the cusps of a root canal treated tooth is an invitation to disaster. While they might last for a few years with this type of filling, the risk is high that one day you will bite something in such a way that the tooth will split and be lost.

So, if you are faced with the decision about having root canal treatment you can be confident that the outcome is almost always good, as long as the tooth is properly restored. And, if you have teeth that already have had root canal treatment but have not yet been capped, talk to your dentist about placing a crown or cap to help protect you from future breakage and possible loss.

Yours for better dental health,

*Rae Dorion, DDS*

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