

Dentist
Dr Lincoln Tentena

What should I expect after a root canal?

A root canal treatment, also known as endodontic therapy, is a dental procedure used to save a badly infected or damaged tooth by removing the infected nerve tissue and cleaning the inside of the tooth. While many people fear the procedure itself, the recovery period often raises more questions. Knowing what is normal after treatment helps reduce anxiety and supports proper healing.

Immediately after a root canal, it is common to experience numbness if local anaesthesia was used. The lip, cheek, and tongue may remain numb for about two to four hours. During this time, patients should avoid chewing, drinking hot beverages, or touching the numb area to prevent accidental injury.

As the anaesthetic wears off, mild discomfort around the treated tooth is expected. This is usually not severe and is often described as soreness or a dull ache. Over-the-counter pain relievers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen are usually enough to manage it.

Why discomfort occurs

Some level of pain or sensitivity after a root canal is normal because the procedure can irritate the tissues around the tooth. Cleaning and shaping the root canals may cause temporary inflammation, leading to tenderness when biting or chewing. If there was a deep infection or abscess before treatment, the surrounding tissues may remain sore even after the infected nerve has been removed, as healing continues.

Discomfort may also result from bite changes. A temporary filling can sometimes sit slightly higher than nearby teeth, creating pressure when chewing. In some cases, pain may feel like it is spreading to the jaw or head, which is known as referred pain and is part of the healing process.

Recovery timeline

The first 24 to 48 hours after treatment are usually when discomfort is most noticeable. Patients may experience mild swelling and tenderness, but the pain should remain manageable with medication and rest. Between three and seven days, symptoms typically improve each day. Chewing becomes easier, and swelling, if present, reduces significantly.

Most people feel close to normal within one to three weeks. However, the tooth may still feel slightly different until a permanent filling or crown is placed, usually within one to two weeks. Full healing of the surrounding bone can take several months, though this stage is usually painless.

Good aftercare is essential for smooth recovery. Patients should follow their dentist's instructions carefully and take any prescribed pain medication as directed. It is also important to avoid chewing hard or sticky foods on the treated side until the final restoration is completed. Gentle brushing and flossing help maintain oral hygiene and prevent reinfection. Dentists may also recommend warm saltwater rinses to soothe the area.

When to seek dental help

While mild discomfort is normal, certain symptoms require attention. Patients should contact a dentist if pain becomes severe or worsens instead of improving, or if swelling spreads to the face or neck. Fever, persistent numbness beyond a day or two, or a loose temporary filling are also warning signs.

If the bite feels uneven or painful after several days, a dental adjustment may be needed. Prompt review helps prevent complications and ensures proper healing.

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