

What to Actually Expect from a Root Canal

The appointment-by-appointment version, not the Wikipedia version.

Root canal treatment has a reputation it hasn't deserved for decades. Most of what people dread about it is the idea of it, not the actual appointment. This guide walks through what really happens, visit by visit, so you know what you're walking into before you sit in the chair.

First, the short version

A root canal removes infected or dying tissue from inside a tooth, cleans and shapes the space left behind, then seals it so the tooth can stay in your mouth instead of coming out. You'll be numb throughout. Most patients feel pressure or movement, not pain. The anticipation is almost always worse than the appointment.

Appointment 1 — Diagnosis

Before any treatment is agreed, we take the time to work out what's actually going on. That means a proper look, an X-ray, and often a CBCT scan — a 3D image that shows detail a flat X-ray simply can't. This matters because root canal systems are rarely as simple as a single straight channel, and treating the wrong tooth, or missing a canal, causes the failures that give root canals a bad name.

You'll leave this appointment with a clear plan: which tooth, what's involved, what it costs, and roughly how long it will take. Nothing is agreed until you've had that conversation.

Appointment 2 — The Treatment

This is the appointment people worry about, so here's exactly what happens:

- **You're numbed first.** The tooth and surrounding tissue are fully anaesthetised, and we don't start until you're comfortable.
- **A rubber dam goes on.** A small sheet of material isolates the tooth, keeping the area clean and dry, and stopping anything unpleasant reaching the back of your throat.
- **The tooth is opened and cleaned under the microscope.** Every root canal here is treated under magnification with coaxial lighting, which reaches into shadowed areas that loupes and headlamps miss. This is where the extra canal that's easy to overlook elsewhere actually gets found.
- **The canal is shaped and disinfected.** Fine instruments clean out the infected tissue and shape the space so it can be sealed properly.
- **It's sealed.** A biocompatible filling material fills the cleaned space, sealing it against reinfection.

A straightforward case takes sixty to ninety minutes. Most patients describe feeling pressure, not pain. Some tenderness for a day or two afterwards is normal — the tooth has just been through a procedure, and mild soreness is your body's usual response, not a sign anything's wrong.

What it doesn't feel like: the sharp, acute pain that likely brought you in. That's the whole point — a root canal ends that pain, it doesn't cause it.

Appointment 3 — The Crown

A tooth that's had root canal treatment is more brittle than before, because the disease process and the treatment itself remove some of the tooth's internal structure. A crown protects it long-term, spreading the biting force evenly and sealing the tooth from the top down. This is usually a separate appointment once the tooth has settled.

Skipping this step is the most common reason a successfully treated tooth fails later — not because the root canal didn't work, but because the tooth cracked under normal biting force without the protection a crown provides.

What It Costs

Molar root canal: £700

Anterior (front) tooth root canal: £500

A protective crown is priced separately and discussed at your diagnosis appointment, so there are no surprises partway through.

When to Call Us

Mild tenderness for a day or two is normal. Call us if you get swelling, a bad taste that doesn't resolve, or pain that's getting worse rather than better a few days after treatment. It's uncommon, but we'd always rather hear from you than have you wonder.

Every root canal at DRJB Smile Clinic is treated under the operating microscope with in-house CBCT scanning, led by Dr John Barclay, who holds a Diploma in Endodontics. If you've got a specific question this guide didn't answer, just ask.