

Though it can be credited with saving many teeth, root canal therapy is probably one of the least appreciated and most dreaded terms. Many patients are confused about root canal or endodontic therapy, sometimes even after having several root canals.

Treatment times and outcomes have been drastically improved with recent advances in dental knowledge, techniques and instruments. Our ability to diagnose problems sooner and a better understanding of root canal anatomy mean less pain and greater success. Endodontic therapy is no longer the painful procedure at the root of many jokes and painful comparisons. However, as I tell all patients--the sooner we treat the tooth, the less chance for extended pain after the procedure. If you wait until you've been up all night in pain, you may continue to have some pain for a day or two. If we had a magic wand, we wouldn't use it to fix teeth.

Many times tooth pain (especially pain with chewing) comes from the bone surrounding the roots of a tooth or the space between the root and bone. That is where we look for signs of a problem on a dental xray. The nerve is responsible for pain from hot, cold, and sweets. Other pain symptoms occur when the nerve problems inside the root of the tooth spread to the area around the outside of the root (between root and bone). One of the biggest misconceptions is that a tooth shouldn't hurt after the "nerve has been removed." This is usually true, but there can be some unusual complications with any root canal. One of the most difficult problems to diagnose is a root fracture below the gum level of the tooth, which will cause the treatment to fail.

Don't fear the "R" word. Embrace it. It is your friend.