

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Rooting out our dental fears

Week aims to take stigma out of root canals

By: Heather Lalley

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It's become a cliché:

"That was worse than a root canal."

"I'd rather have a root canal than do that."

"That was more fun than a root canal."

And, frankly, the men and women who perform root canals every day – the endodontists – are sick of your whining.

So, the American Association of Endodontists has proclaimed this week the first-ever Root Canal Awareness Week to spread the word that this most-feared of dental procedures really isn't all that bad. "Root canals are not uncomfortable. They can be as easy as having a filling done," says Dr. John Olmsted, a dentist in North Carolina who is president of the AAE. "They're not too time-consuming and they're cost-effective."

Sure, that's easy for him to say. Olmsted is 56 years old, and while he's performed the procedure more times than he can count, he's never actually had one himself.

"I have been lucky," he admits.

Surprisingly, the Simpsons of Spokane would agree with him.

Ed Simpson has had a half-dozen root canals and his wife, Glenda, says "I couldn't even tell you how many I've had."

They both say that the procedure is nothing to fear.

"It was wonderful," Glenda Simpson, 54, said of her most-recent root canal. "I've had so many that it is no big deal. The hardest thing is getting the shot to deaden the area. Once you get past that, they do their thing. I think it's the fear of the unknown."

Ed Simpson says his root canals have been no big deal, either. But he can understand why they freak people out so much.

"The incessant scream of the drill right next to your ear and the feeling of the drill in your tooth," he said, describing a dental-phobe's worst nightmare.

Root canals, endodontists say, have gotten such a bad rap because people are often in tremendous pain before the procedure.

"It's the pain of that nerve dying," says Dr. John Wantulok, Spokane's first endodontist, who started practicing in 1970. "It can be very, very painful."

What exactly is a root canal?

The center of each tooth contains the pulp, which is packed with nerves and blood vessels. Through decay or injury, the pulp can die, causing severe pain. This dead tissue can cause an abscessed tooth. Before root canals, these teeth ended up being pulled. But, with root canal, the diseased center of the tooth can be scraped out. The tooth is then filled and capped.

"Anytime you can save your natural tooth, that's probably the most important," Olmsted says. "Always try to keep your God-given parts."

What's really worse than a root canal?

The Chicago Dental Society recently polled its 350 member dentists to find out:

10. A long car ride with in-laws.
9. Getting a Brazilian bikini wax.
8. A birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese
7. Listening to teenagers' music.
6. Being bitten by a patient.
5. Asking a girl out for a first date.
4. Watching the Cubs.
3. Watching political ads.
2. Giving birth – at least a root canal doesn't go home with you, need diaper changes, cry, then learn to talk.

And the No. 1 answer, at least according to dentists:

Hearing someone say, "That was about as much fun as a root canal."

Source: Chicago Dental Society