

When Might You Be Referred to a Dental Specialist?

By Joy of Dentistry Health Desk · 6 min read

When a dentist says the words "I'd like to refer you to a specialist," the reaction is often a small jolt of worry. It helps to know that a referral is usually a sign of careful, thorough care rather than a reason for alarm. Just as a family doctor sends patients to a cardiologist or a dermatologist for certain things, a general dentist draws on dental specialists when a situation calls for focused expertise or particular training.

This article explains who the main dental specialists are, the kinds of situations that lead to a referral, and what the process tends to look like. None of it replaces your own dentist's assessment, which is what determines whether a referral is right for you.

Why a referral happens

General dentists handle a broad range of care, and many are comfortable with procedures that sit outside the routine. A referral tends to come up when a case benefits from the extra training, focus, or equipment that a specialist concentrates on day in and day out. Common reasons include:

- A condition that falls squarely within a recognised specialty area.
- A complex case where additional expertise improves planning.
- A procedure your dentist judges is better handled by someone who performs it frequently.
- A second, more focused assessment to confirm or refine a plan.

Importantly, a referral does not mean you are being handed off for good. In most cases the specialist addresses the specific issue and you return to your general dentist for ongoing care.

The main dental specialties, in plain terms

In Ontario, dental specialties are formally recognised by the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. These are the ones patients encounter most often:

Specialty	Focus area	You might be referred for
Periodontics	Gums and the bone that supports teeth; implants	Advanced gum disease, gum or bone concerns, implant planning
Endodontics	The inside of the tooth, including the nerve	Complex root canal situations or retreatment
Oral and maxillofacial surgery	Surgery of the mouth, jaws, and face	Difficult extractions, jaw concerns, certain surgical cases
Orthodontics	Tooth and jaw alignment	Bite and alignment issues
Oral pathology and oral medicine	Diseases affecting the mouth	Investigating an unusual lesion or persistent symptom
Prosthodontics	Replacing and restoring teeth	Complex restorative or full-mouth cases

You do not need to memorise this. The practical point is that each specialty exists because certain problems reward deep, concentrated experience.

When a specialty is available within the same practice

Not every referral means travelling to an unfamiliar clinic. Some practices include a specialist alongside their general dentists, so a focused assessment can happen in a setting you already know. In Thornhill, for example, [the clinical team at MiNa](#) brings together general and family dentistry with a periodontics specialist, which can make certain gum and implant assessments more straightforward to coordinate. Whether an in-house option or an external specialist suits your case is something your dentist decides based on the referral needed.

What to expect from the process

A referral usually unfolds in a few steps. Your dentist shares relevant records and images with the specialist so you are not starting from zero. The specialist carries out their own examination, which may include further imaging, and discusses findings and options with you. After treatment, or sometimes after assessment alone, you generally return to your general dentist, who stays involved in your overall care.

It is worth bringing the same preparation you would to any important appointment: a current medication list, your questions, and any records you were given. If anything about the referral is unclear, ask your dentist why it is being made and what they hope it will achieve. Understanding the reasoning tends to ease the worry that a referral can stir up.

A few practical things to sort out

Beyond the clinical side, a short checklist can make a referral run smoothly:

- **Ask how urgent it is.** Some referrals are time-sensitive; others can wait until a convenient slot. Knowing which helps you plan rather than worry.
- **Check how the records travel.** Usually the office sends them directly, but confirm whether you need to carry anything, such as recent X-rays or a scan, to avoid repeating them.
- **Clarify the fees and coverage.** A specialist's fees can differ from a general dentist's, and some benefit plans treat specialist care differently. It is reasonable to ask the specialist's office for an estimate in writing and to check how your coverage applies before treatment begins.
- **Keep your general dentist in the loop.** Ask that findings be sent back to them, so your routine care stays coordinated once the specific issue is addressed.

Treating a referral as a normal, manageable step — rather than a verdict — tends to make the whole experience calmer. Your dentist is still the person coordinating your overall care, and a specialist is simply another member of the team working on a particular piece of it.

Frequently asked questions

Why would a dentist refer me to a specialist?

Usually because your situation benefits from focused expertise, extra training, or particular equipment that a specialist concentrates on. It is a routine part of thorough care, much like a family doctor referring to a medical specialist, and it generally does not mean anything is seriously wrong. Your dentist can explain the specific reason in your case.

Does a referral mean my problem is serious?

Not necessarily. Referrals happen for a wide range of reasons, from a complex root canal to implant planning to assessing something unusual. Many are precautionary or simply reflect that a particular procedure is best handled by someone who performs it often. Ask your dentist what the referral is for so you understand the context.

Will I keep seeing my regular dentist?

In most cases, yes. A specialist typically addresses the specific issue and then you return to your general dentist for routine and ongoing care. The two often work together, sharing records so your overall treatment stays coordinated.

Sources & further reading

- [Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario — Dental Specialties](#) — the specialties formally recognised in Ontario and what they cover.
- [Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario — Information for Patients](#) — what patients can expect from dental care in Ontario.
- [Canadian Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — general patient guidance across dental topics.

Published by Joy of Dentistry (jodmagazine.com). Educational content only; it is not a substitute for a professional dental examination and individual advice.