Crown or Porcelain Filling: What Is the Difference? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/difference-crown-porcelain-filling/

Details:

A crown, sometimes called a cap, is a fixed restoration that covers the whole visible part of a tooth. A porcelain filling, also known as an inlay or onlay, is a ceramic restoration that replaces only the damaged part of a tooth and keeps the rest of the natural tooth. At Core Dental we choose between them by looking at how much healthy tooth remains. Your dentist will advise which suits you after an examination.

What causes a tooth to need a crown or porcelain filling?

Teeth can be damaged, broken or weakened in several ways. Common causes include injury, decay, a large existing filling, and wear and tear over many years, whether from grinding or from normal use. When a tooth has lost a lot of its structure, a simple filling may not be strong enough to protect it, and your dentist may talk with you about a porcelain restoration or a crown.

What is a dental crown?

A dental crown, also called a cap, is a fixed restoration that completely covers an existing tooth. Crowns can be made from several materials, including porcelain or ceramic, porcelain fused to metal, metal alloys, gold and resin. Porcelain gives a natural looking finish and can be reinforced with other materials for added strength and durability.

Because a crown covers the entire natural crown of the tooth, the dentist has to remove a significant amount of tooth structure to fit it. For that reason we only suggest a crown when it is clinically justified. You can read more in our guides on what a dental crown is and which type of crown to choose .

When is a crown recommended instead of a porcelain filling?

A crown may be recommended when very little healthy tooth structure remains. Situations where your dentist may suggest a crown include:

a cavity that is too large for a filling

a tooth that has had root canal treatment

a tooth that is worn down, chipped or weakened

a discoloured or badly shaped tooth where you would like to improve the look of the tooth

What is a porcelain filling?

Porcelain fillings are sometimes called inlays, onlays or CEREC restorations. This type of filling is made of a porcelain or ceramic material, although the chemical and physical properties can vary between products. An inlay sits within the biting surface of a tooth, while an onlay also covers one or more of the cusps. Both aim to keep more of your natural tooth than a crown does.

How many appointments does each option need?

CEREC restorations can often be completed in a single appointment. A scan of the prepared tooth is used to design the restoration on screen, and a milling machine in the clinic then produces it to match the contours of your tooth. CEREC is available at our Epping, South Melbourne and Caroline Springs clinics, and availability may change, so please confirm when you book.

For other types of porcelain fillings and crowns, more than one appointment is usually needed. The restoration is sent to a laboratory, where a dental technician fabricates it, and a temporary restoration is usually placed in the meantime. Read more about same-day crowns with CEREC .

How do you decide between a crown and a porcelain filling?

Your dentist will examine the tooth, usually take X-rays, and look at how much healthy tooth is left, where the damage is, how the tooth bites against others, and whether it has had root canal treatment. We then explain the options, the likely number of appointments, the risks and limitations, and the costs. Ask us what each option is intended to achieve and what care it will need afterwards. A written quote is provided before treatment starts.

Filling, onlay, crown: a ladder defined by how much gets covered

The difference between a crown and a porcelain filling is not really a difference of material — porcelain appears in both. It is a difference of coverage, and the published advice describes a ladder with a clear rung for each step.

A filling treats a hole. The Victorian Department of Health: "Dental fillings are used to treat tooth decay that has caused a cavity (hole). The dentist removes decay from the tooth, cleans the cavity, dries and seals it with a filling material." Porcelain is on its published list of filling materials, alongside composite resin, glass-ionomer cement, dental amalgam and gold. So a porcelain filling is a filling — material inside the space where decay was.

An onlay covers part of the outside. The Department: onlays "cover the tooth less extensively than a crown and may be used if there is enough tooth structure remaining to support it."

A crown covers all of it: "Crowns cover the whole tooth and can be made of porcelain, metal, or a combination of both depending on the area and the aesthetic or functional needs." Its companion page calls it "a metal or ceramic shell that is placed over the entire tooth to fully cover the tooth."

Set out like that, the question answers itself: a porcelain filling fills a cavity, an onlay caps part of the tooth, a crown encases it. The material can be the same at every rung. What changes is how much of your tooth is involved — and, as a direct consequence, how much of it is removed to make room.

One term that causes confusion : a porcelain restoration placed in or over a large cavity is sometimes called an inlay or an onlay rather than a filling. That overlap in everyday usage is our own observation rather than a distinction the Department draws, and it is exactly why asking how much of my tooth will be covered gets you a clearer answer than asking which treatment it is called.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 3 June 2026); Dental fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025). Both accessed 5 November 2026.

Which keeps more of your tooth — and why that is the question that matters

Of all the ways to compare these options, the published advice points at one in particular, in a sentence from the Department of Health that is worth putting at the centre of the decision:

"An intact tooth is stronger than a filled one, so it's important to try and avoid fillings due to tooth decay."

Stronger when intact. Which means every rung up the ladder has a cost in tooth structure, and the sensible default is the lowest rung that will actually work.

What each step costs you. For a filling, the Department describes removing the decay and sealing the cavity — the loss is the decay plus what has to go to reach it. For a crown: "A thin layer of tooth may be removed from the top and all around the tooth to make space for the material." Top and all around, because the shell covers everything.

And the published risk attached to that preparation: "In some cases this can get close to the nerve and blood vessels inside the tooth (pulp) and the tooth may need further treatment, like a root canal treatment."

Then the commitment. The Department states of a crown: "It is irreversible; once a tooth is cut for a crown, it will always need a crown." A filling carries no equivalent statement. Fillings do need renewing — "all fillings need to be replaced eventually" — but replacing a filling is not the same kind of event as committing a tooth to being crowned for the rest of its life.

So why would anyone choose the bigger option? Because sometimes the tooth has already lost the argument. The Department's stated purpose for a crown is that it "protects the tooth, which may have been weakened by large fillings or decay in the past", and the onlay condition — "if there is enough tooth structure remaining to support it" — is precisely an acknowledgement that sometimes there is not enough left. A large filling in a weak tooth is not a conservative choice if the tooth then fractures.

The published advice also connects the two ends of this. A root-filled tooth often needs the bigger restoration: "Teeth that require root canal treatment have sometimes lost a lot of tooth structure due to previous decay or cracks and may require further protection in the form of posts, crowns or other similar materials." And a crown over a root-filled tooth "also protects the tooth from breaking after root canal treatment."

The argument for not getting here at all. The Department puts the timing point simply: "Finding decay in the early stages means less of your tooth needs to be repaired in the process of getting a filling." Decay found early is a small filling. Decay found late may be a crown, or a root canal and then a crown. The choice between a filling and a crown is often made years earlier than the appointment where it gets discussed.

What you should be told. Before any such treatment, the published expectation is explicit: "your dentist will explain the treatment options and give you an estimate of the cost and the time it will take." If a crown is proposed and you have not been told whether a smaller restoration would do, that is a fair question — and the onlay condition gives you the words for it.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); Dental treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 3 June 2026); Cosmetic dentistry and teeth whitening, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 12 December 2025); Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025). All accessed 5 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is a porcelain filling the same as a crown?

No. A porcelain filling replaces part of a tooth and leaves the remaining natural tooth in place, while a crown covers the whole visible part of the tooth. Your dentist chooses between them based on how much healthy tooth remains.

Which keeps more of my natural tooth?

A porcelain inlay or onlay generally involves removing less tooth than a crown, because a crown needs the whole outer part of the tooth to be reshaped. Whether it is suitable depends on how much of your tooth is damaged.

Can I have a porcelain restoration in one visit?

Some clinics offer CEREC, which can produce certain porcelain restorations in a single appointment. Other restorations are made in a laboratory and need more visits. Ask us when you book whether CEREC is available at your clinic.

Does a tooth need a crown after root canal treatment?

Often a tooth that has had root canal treatment is weaker, so a crown is commonly considered to protect it. Your dentist will assess the tooth and tell you whether a crown or another restoration is suitable.

How long will a crown or porcelain filling last?

Longevity varies with the material, the tooth, your bite, grinding habits and how well you look after the restoration. Regular check-ups and good home care help. We cannot guarantee how long any restoration will last.

What is an onlay, and where does it sit between the two?

Between a filling and a crown. The Victorian Department of Health describes onlays as covering "the tooth less extensively than a crown", while crowns "cover the whole tooth". So the three options form a ladder by coverage: a filling fills the cavity, an onlay caps part of the tooth, a crown encases it.

What decides whether an onlay is possible?

How much sound tooth is left. The published condition is that an onlay "may be used if there is enough tooth structure remaining to support it". That is a property of your tooth rather than a preference, and it is worth asking about before accepting full coverage.

Does a bigger restoration mean a stronger tooth?

Not by itself, and the published advice points the other way: "an intact tooth is stronger than a filled one." Every step up the ladder costs tooth structure — for a crown, "a thin layer of tooth may be removed from the top and all around the tooth". The aim is the smallest restoration that will actually do the job.

Why does a root-filled tooth often need a crown?

Because of what is left of it. The Department notes that teeth needing root canal treatment "have sometimes lost a lot of tooth structure due to previous decay or cracks and may require further protection in the form of posts, crowns or other similar materials", and that covering the biting surface "also protects the tooth from breaking after root canal treatment".

What should I be told before agreeing to a crown?

Options, cost and time, at minimum. The published expectation is that "your dentist will explain the treatment options and give you an estimate of the cost and the time it will take." If a crown is proposed and no smaller restoration has been discussed, the onlay condition gives you the words to ask.

Related services and further reading

Dental crowns

Fillings and restorations

What is a dental crown?

What should I know about dental crowns?

Same-day crowns with CEREC

What is the difference between silver fillings and white fillings?

How do I know if I need a filling?

Why would I need dental veneers?

How can we help?

If you think a tooth needs a filling or a crown, call us on 13 13 16 or book online at your nearest Core Dental clinic. Our dentists will examine the tooth, explain the options and give you a written quote before any treatment starts. You can also read our general dentistry page.

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What does a dental crown cover and what is it made from?

A dental crown, also called a cap, is a fixed restoration that completely covers an existing tooth. Core Dental crowns can be made from materials such as porcelain or ceramic, porcelain fused to metal, metal alloys, gold or resin.

What is a porcelain inlay or onlay?

A porcelain inlay or onlay is a ceramic filling that replaces part of a damaged tooth and leaves the remaining natural tooth in place. Core Dental dentists may use these when too much tooth has been lost for a simple filling.

When does a Core Dental dentist recommend a crown?

A crown may be recommended when little healthy tooth remains, for example when a cavity is too large for a filling, after root canal treatment, or when a tooth is worn, chipped or weakened. Your dentist decides after examining you.

Which Core Dental clinics offer CEREC restorations?

Core Dental offers CEREC at Epping, South Melbourne and Caroline Springs. CEREC can produce some porcelain restorations in one appointment, and availability may change, so please confirm with the clinic when you book.

What causes a tooth to become weak or broken?

Teeth can be damaged by injury, decay, a large filling, and wear and tear. Core Dental dentists examine the tooth and may take X-rays to decide whether a filling, porcelain restoration or crown suits your situation.

Why do some porcelain restorations need several visits?

Restorations not made by chairside CEREC are fabricated in a laboratory by a dental technician, so a temporary restoration is usually placed first and you return for fitting. The number of visits depends on the treatment planned.

How do I book a crown or filling assessment?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au. We will arrange an examination, explain the options and provide a written quote before any treatment starts.