Filling Types, Cavities and Check-ups | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/fillings-and-restorations-faqs/

Details:

A filling repairs a tooth that has been damaged by decay. Cavities are caused by acid from food and drink wearing away tooth enamel, and many start in places you cannot see or feel, such as between the teeth or in the pits of the back teeth. The main filling materials are gold, silver amalgam, ceramic and composite, and each suits different teeth and situations. At Core Dental our dentists can examine your teeth and explain which option may suit you.

What causes cavities?

Cavities are caused by acid that erodes tooth enamel. The acid comes from bacteria in plaque breaking down sugars and starches in food and drink, and from acidic foods and drinks themselves. Many cavities start in the tiny spaces between teeth or in the pits and grooves of the back molar teeth. This makes them impossible to detect just by looking at your smile in the mirror, which is why dental examinations and X-rays matter.

Why is a six-month check-up recommended?

A cavity develops slowly. Regular check-ups, commonly every six months, allow your dentist to detect a cavity and treat it while it is still very small, which usually reduces both time and cost. Your dentist may suggest a different interval depending on your oral health, so ask what suits you. See our dental check-up page and our guide to knowing if you need a filling .

What types of dental fillings are available?

The main types of fillings are gold, silver amalgam, ceramic and composite. Each material suits different conditions and different locations of the cavity. Your dentist will consider the size and position of the cavity, your bite, your budget and your preferences when discussing the choice.

What are the pros and cons of gold fillings?

Gold fillings are strong and can last up to around 15 years. Many people consider them more attractive than silver fillings, especially on back molars. However, they usually cost more and need more than one appointment to place.

What are the drawbacks of silver amalgam fillings?

Silver amalgam fillings are strong and durable, and their cost is usually lower than gold. They react more to heat and cold, expanding and contracting as you eat and drink hot and cold things. Over time this can lead to the filled tooth cracking or the filling becoming loose. Many people also dislike their grey appearance. Read our comparison of silver and white fillings .

What are ceramic and composite fillings?

Ceramic fillings are made from porcelain-type material, which can be shaped to match the tooth closely and resists staining. Composite fillings are made from tooth-coloured resin that the dentist places directly into the prepared tooth and sets with a light. Composite is a popular choice because it blends with your natural teeth and bonds to them, often allowing the dentist to keep more of the healthy tooth. Whether either suits you depends on the tooth and your individual circumstances.

Are silver and gold fillings still used today?

Yes, in some situations. Many patients now choose tooth-coloured options for appearance, but gold and silver amalgam remain available and can suit certain teeth. Some people have concerns about a possible allergy to amalgam, which you can read about in our article on allergic reactions to amalgam fillings . Tell your dentist about any allergies and your preferences.

How can we help?

If you think you may have a cavity, a broken filling or a sensitive tooth, our dentists can examine your teeth and talk through your options at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. We quote before treatment starts, and we offer interest-free payment plans. Call 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au. See our fillings and restorations service page for more detail.

The published list of filling materials, and what it does and does not rank

Most explanations of filling materials arrive as a comparison table with winners and losers. The Victorian Department of Health publishes a list instead, and the way it is worded is the useful part.

Its types of filling material, in full:

"composite resin (also known as 'tooth-coloured' fillings)"

"glass-ionomer cement"

"dental amalgam (also known as 'silver' fillings, rarely used)"

"gold (rarely used due to cost)"

"porcelain."

Five materials, two of them flagged by the Department itself as rarely used. That is worth pausing on, because the public conversation about fillings is still largely a two-way argument between silver and white, while the published list has five entries and treats the silver one as uncommon in current practice.

Then comes the sentence that does the real work: "Each different material has benefits and limitations. Some types of material may be better than others in certain situations. Your oral health professional can discuss your options with you."

That is a situational statement, not a hierarchy. The Department does not say which material is strongest, which lasts longest, or which it recommends. It says the answer depends on the situation. We are not going to improve on that by publishing a league table, because any ranking we printed would be ours rather than the Department's, and your tooth is a situation rather than a category.

The one preference the published advice does express is about where the decision gets made. The Department of Health's companion guidance on dental treatment puts it this way: "You will be given advice on the most suitable material based on the size, shape and location of the filling." Size, shape,

location — three properties of your particular cavity, none of which can be known from a web page. It adds that "a common choice is tooth-coloured filling material (such as composite resin or ceramic), which can restore the appearance of the tooth, as well as its shape and function". Note that "a common choice" is a description of what is commonly chosen, not a recommendation that it is best for you.

On the amalgam question specifically, the Department's position has a heading of its own: "Amalgam ('silver') fillings are safe". Its reasoning: "High amounts of mercury are harmful to human health, but the amount of 'free' mercury (mercury that could get into the body) in set amalgam fillings is so low that it has no effect on health." The operative word is set — the distinction being drawn is between mercury in a hardened filling and mercury loose in the environment. We will come to what this does not settle in a moment.

What it does not settle is worth naming. The Department's filling page says nothing at all about allergy to any filling material — no symptoms, no test, no indication of how common it is. So if you have had a reaction you believe is connected to a filling, there is no published figure for us to quote at you, and the next step is an examination rather than a statistic.

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). Both accessed 4 November 2026.

The argument for not needing the filling at all

A page of filling FAQs can leave the impression that the choice of material is the important decision. The published advice puts the emphasis somewhere else, and it does so in one blunt sentence: "An intact tooth is stronger than a filled one, so it's important to try and avoid fillings due to tooth decay."

That reframes the whole subject. The best available filling is still a repair, and the Department is explicit that repair has limits: "Dental fillings cannot completely repair all damage to teeth but may be necessary to maintain the tooth structure and keep teeth doing their important job." Necessary, useful, not a restoration of the original.

The Department's list of what prevents the need:

"brushing your teeth twice a day"

"using fluoride toothpaste"

"enjoying a wide variety of nutritious foods"

"choosing tap water over sugary drinks"

Four items, none of them expensive, and the fourth is a swap rather than an act of discipline.

Then there is the timing argument, which is the one patients most often miss. The Department's wording: "Finding decay in the early stages means less of your tooth needs to be repaired in the process of getting a filling." Read that against the intact-tooth sentence and the two combine into something concrete — the earlier decay is found, the less healthy tooth is removed to deal with it. A check-up is not only a chance to catch a problem; it changes how much of your tooth survives the treatment.

On intervals, the Department's companion guidance states that "it is recommended that everyone, including young children, visit the dentist twice a year", and its filling page adds that "children should have their first dental check-up by 1 year of age" while telling adults to "ask your dental practitioner how often you should have a dental check-up". Those sit together sensibly: a general recommendation, and an instruction to get a personal answer. It is worth knowing that the evidence base behind a universal six-month interval has been examined in a Cochrane review and found weak — which is an argument for asking what interval suits you, not an argument for stopping.

And fillings are not permanent fixtures. The Department states plainly that "all fillings need to be replaced eventually" and that "regular dental check-ups can help ensure fillings that are worn out due to

chewing are found and fixed". It does not attach a lifespan to any material, and neither will we. It also gives one instruction that is genuinely urgent: "Fillings also sometimes fall out. If part of your filling breaks off or if your whole filling falls out, see your oral health professional as soon as possible." An open cavity is not a cosmetic problem.

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). Cochrane Oral Health, Recall intervals for oral health reviews. All accessed 4 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Can I see a cavity myself?

Often you cannot. Many cavities form between teeth or in the grooves of the back teeth, where they are hidden from view. A dental examination and, where appropriate, X-rays are the reliable way to find them early.

Does a filling hurt?

Your dentist will usually use local anaesthetic so you should not feel pain during the procedure. You may notice some sensitivity afterwards. If it persists, tell your dentist. See what happens when you get a dental filling .

How long does a filling last?

It depends on the material, the size of the filling, your bite, and how well you look after your teeth. Gold fillings can last up to around 15 years. Your dentist will check your fillings at your regular check-ups.

What if a temporary filling falls out?

Contact your dental clinic promptly so the tooth can be protected and the permanent restoration arranged. Meanwhile, keep the area clean and avoid chewing on that side. Read more about what to do if a temporary filling falls out .

Which filling material is right for me?

There is no single answer. Your dentist will consider the position and size of the cavity, your bite, your preferences and your budget, and will explain the benefits and limitations of each material.

Is amalgam still considered safe?

Yes, on the published position. The Victorian Department of Health heads its section "Amalgam ('silver') fillings are safe" and explains that "the amount of 'free' mercury (mercury that could get into the body) in set amalgam fillings is so low that it has no effect on health". The same page lists amalgam as "rarely used" in current practice, which is a separate point about how often it is chosen.

Why is gold described as rarely used?

The Department gives the reason in the list itself: "gold (rarely used due to cost)". It is a price observation rather than a clinical objection — the material is on the published list of options, simply an uncommon choice.

Is a stronger material always the better choice?

The published advice does not frame it that way. Its position is that "each different material has benefits and limitations" and that "some types of material may be better than others in certain situations". The relevant properties, in its companion guidance, are "the size, shape and location of the filling" — so the question is which material suits the particular tooth, not which material wins in general.

Does finding decay early change how much tooth I lose?

Yes, and this is the strongest argument for check-ups. The Department states that "finding decay in the early stages means less of your tooth needs to be repaired in the process of getting a filling", alongside the blunter point that "an intact tooth is stronger than a filled one". Earlier detection means a smaller repair.

Does the state health advice say how long each material lasts?

No. The Department's entire durability statement is that "all fillings need to be replaced eventually", with the practical advice that check-ups catch "fillings that are worn out due to chewing". Where this page gives a figure for a gold filling, that reflects our own practice experience rather than published state health advice, and we would rather label which is which than let the two be read as the same thing. What matters for your own filling is the size, position and condition of the tooth it is in.

Related services and further reading

Fillings and restorations

Dental check-ups

How do I know if I need a filling?

What is the difference between silver and white fillings?

What happens when you get a dental filling

Tooth sensitivity after a filling

4 things to avoid if you have sensitive teeth

5 tips for a healthier smile

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, with interest-free payment plans and 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 mornings, 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 causes tooth cavities?

Cavities form when acid from food, drink and plaque bacteria erodes tooth enamel. Many start between teeth or in back-tooth grooves, so Core Dental dentists use examinations and X-rays to find them early.

Why do dentists suggest regular check-ups for fillings?

Cavities develop slowly, so regular check-ups let Core Dental dentists find and treat them while they are small, which usually reduces treatment time and cost. We will advise the interval that suits you.

What filling materials does a dentist choose from?

The main materials are gold, silver amalgam, ceramic and composite. Core Dental dentists consider the cavity's size and position, your bite and your preferences before recommending one.

Why do some people dislike silver amalgam fillings?

Silver amalgam is strong and usually lower in cost, but it expands and contracts with heat and cold, which can crack the tooth or loosen the filling, and many people dislike the grey appearance.

Why are composite fillings popular?

Composite fillings are tooth-coloured, blend in with natural teeth and bond to them, often allowing the dentist to keep more healthy tooth. Core Dental dentists can discuss whether they suit your tooth.

Are gold fillings long lasting?

Gold fillings are strong and can last up to around 15 years, but they usually cost more and need more than one appointment. Core Dental dentists can explain whether gold suits your situation.

How do I book a filling appointment at Core Dental?

Call 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, and we quote before treatment starts.