How Do I Know If I Need a Filling? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/how-do-i-know-if-i-need-a-filling/

Details:

Warning signs that you may need a filling include toothache (sharp pains, dull aches or general soreness), a rough or jagged edge you can feel on a tooth with your tongue, a visible hole in the tooth, pain when you chew or put pressure on a tooth, and dental floss that frays after gentle flossing. However, not everyone has symptoms, so regular check-ups matter. At Core Dental our dentists examine your teeth, may take X-rays and explain whether a filling is needed.

What are the warning signs that you may need a filling?

Common signs include:

Achy teeth, from sharp pains to dull aches or general toothache.

A rough or jagged texture when you run your tongue across a tooth.

A visible hole or dark spot in a tooth.

Pain when chewing or applying pressure to a tooth.

Floss that becomes frayed or shredded when you floss gently.

These signs can also have other causes, so please book an examination rather than waiting. Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, breathing or swallowing difficulty or serious facial injury.

What does a rough texture on a tooth mean?

If you run your tongue across a tooth and feel jagged edges that were not there before, it may mean the tooth surface is breaking down. This can be a sign of tooth decay that needs attention, though it can also come from a chipped or cracked tooth. Either way, a dentist should have a look.

Why does frayed floss suggest a possible cavity?

Floss normally comes out whole after you clean between your teeth. If it frays or shreds when you floss gently, the edge of a tooth or an old filling may have become sharp or rough, which can point to decay. Mention it to your dentist at your next visit.

Why are fillings important when decay is caught early?

A filling placed early helps stop decay from progressing, so bacteria do not reach the centre of the tooth, where the nerve and blood vessels are located. Early treatment is usually simpler and helps avoid more complicated problems.

What can happen if decay is not treated early?

Untreated decay can become more severe and move closer to the nerve, causing inflammation of the nerve and blood vessels. In time this can lead to nerve death and sometimes tooth loss, and may mean more involved treatment such as root canal therapy or extraction.

Do you always have symptoms when you need a filling?

No. Not everyone feels pain or sees a hole before they need a filling. That is why we encourage regular comprehensive check-ups. At a check-up the dentist looks at the whole of your mouth, including the tongue, cheeks, gums and jaws, before examining your teeth. They may take X-rays and perform other tests to help diagnose decay and other conditions. X-rays show the teeth in cross-section, and dark spots can indicate decay that cannot be seen with the eye. If decay is deep enough, your dentist may advise a filling to stop it going deeper.

How can we help?

If you have any of these signs, or it has been a while since your last check-up, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans. You can read what happens when you get a dental filling or the difference between silver and white fillings . Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Further detail from Core Dental

The following points are drawn from Core Dental's own published material on this topic. They are included here for completeness, and anything that applies to your own treatment should be confirmed with your clinician.

The filling itself acts as a 'plug' when part of the original structure has been lost due to things such as teeth decay or trauma. Tooth decay is a bacteria-driven process that erodes the minerals in your teeth, making them weaker. Over time the bacteria travels through the layers of the tooth, the harder outer enamel shell and the softer inner dentine to cause deeper breakdown of the tooth, resulting in a hole. The purpose of a filling – or what dentists tend to call a "restoration" – is to "restore" a tooth to how it should look and function.

Regular check-ups with your dentist can locate and target areas that are in the early stages of erosion.

Why you cannot answer this question in the mirror

The honest answer to "how do I know if I need a filling" is that for the most common locations, you cannot — and the published advice says so in a single clause that explains the whole reason check-ups exist.

The Victorian Department of Health, on when imaging is needed: "If a suspected dental problem is difficult to see (for example, possible decay between two touching teeth, or an infection), x-rays may be needed."

Between two touching teeth. That is the location the mirror cannot show you, a toothbrush cannot feel, and in the early stages nothing hurts. Decay that starts on the contact surface between two teeth is hidden by the neighbouring tooth itself, which is a matter of geometry rather than of how carefully you look.

This is also why a check-up is a physical examination rather than a glance. The Department describes what the dentist actually does: "Your dentist will check each tooth using small instruments, such as a mirror and probe (a fine, pick-like tool). The dentist looks for issues such as tooth decay, gum disease and other conditions."

Each tooth, with a probe. And the examination is wider than the teeth: "Soft tissues in the mouth (gums, tongue, lips, cheeks and palate) are also checked for signs of oral cancer and other possible problems. Your dentist may also check your jaw joints and the lymph nodes in your neck."

That last sentence surprises people who think they are in for a decay inspection. The published description of a routine check-up includes an oral cancer check and an examination of the jaw joints and the lymph nodes of the neck. It is one of the better arguments for keeping the appointment when nothing hurts.

The medication question is not small talk, either. The Department: "When you go for a dental check-up, your dentist should ask questions about your general health and medications. Many health conditions have an effect on your oral health and vice versa." And: "Some medicines can affect your mouth or need to be taken into consideration before dental treatment." So the health questions at the start of an appointment are part of the examination, and an incomplete answer makes the rest of it less reliable.

What you should be told at the end. The Department sets an expectation that is worth holding us to: "If there's a problem, your dentist will explain the treatment options and give you an estimate of the cost and the time it will take." Options, cost, time — before anything begins.

And the argument for not waiting until you can tell: the Department's filling guidance 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 plainer point that "an intact tooth is stronger than a filled one". By the time a cavity is something you can detect yourself, the repair is larger than it needed to be.

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 4 November 2026.

When it is no longer a filling question

There is a second reason not to self-diagnose, and it is the more important one. Some of the symptoms people read as "I probably need a filling" are symptoms of the pulp inside the tooth being damaged or infected — a different problem with a different treatment.

The Victorian Department of Health's published list of symptoms of a damaged or diseased tooth pulp:

"unprovoked or spontaneous pain"

"sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods"

"pain when biting or chewing"

"loosening of the tooth"

"swelling of the gum near the affected tooth"

"oozing of pus surrounding the affected tooth"

"facial swelling"

Several of those overlap with what people expect from a cavity — sensitivity to hot and cold, pain on biting. Two of them do not overlap with anything minor: oozing pus and facial swelling. If either of those is what brought you to this page, the relevant timeframe is now rather than your next routine appointment.

Then the asymmetry that undoes self-diagnosis entirely. The Department: "Sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms. In these cases, the problem is usually diagnosed by special tests or x-rays during a dental check-up or treatment for other dental concerns."

So the absence of symptoms is not evidence of the absence of a problem — and the published route to finding the silent cases is a check-up, not a symptom.

One cause on the published list deserves singling out : "decay beneath a deep filling". The Department lists it alongside "deep-seated and untreated tooth decay", "trauma that damages a tooth", "habitual tooth grinding (bruxism)", "long-standing cracks in the teeth" and "advanced gum disease". A filling you already have is not a permanently solved tooth, which is the other half of the same page's statement that "all fillings need to be replaced eventually" and that check-ups catch "fillings that are worn out due to chewing".

Why the timing matters. The Department sets out what untreated pulp infection can lead to: spreading infection, where "once the pulp becomes infected, it loses its ability to fight the spread of the infection"; "bone loss in the area – the infection may spread around the ends of the infected root canal and erode surrounding jawbone"; and loss of the tooth, where "tooth replacement options are available but may be limited if the infection has already caused advanced bone loss."

That final clause is the one worth reading twice. Delay does not only risk the tooth — it can narrow what can be done afterwards.

None of which means the likely answer for you is dramatic. Most of what is found at a check-up is small, and the published advice on root canal treatment is encouraging where it is willing to be numerical: "about 90 to 95 per cent of people who undergo root canal treatment can expect a functional tooth after the treatment". The point is simply that "do I need a filling" is a question with more than two possible answers, and the only way to get yours is to have the tooth looked at.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025); Dental fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025). Both accessed 4 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Can a cavity heal by itself?

Very early demineralisation may be reversed with fluoride and good habits, but a cavity that has formed will not heal itself. Your dentist can tell which stage your tooth is at and whether monitoring or a filling is suitable.

Does a filling hurt?

Your dentist usually uses local anaesthetic so the area is numb during treatment. You may feel pressure but should not feel pain. Tell us if you feel any discomfort and we can adjust. Some mild sensitivity afterwards can be normal.

How often should I have a check-up?

Review intervals depend on your individual oral health risks, so they are not the same for everyone. Your dentist will recommend how often to visit, and regular check-ups help find decay before it causes symptoms.

What should I do if my tooth hurts right now?

Contact us promptly so a dentist can examine the tooth. Emergency appointments are reserved where possible. If you have swelling that affects breathing or swallowing, or serious facial injury, call 000.

Can I prevent the need for fillings?

Brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, cleaning between your teeth, limiting sugary snacks and drinks and attending regular check-ups all help reduce the risk of decay. Your dentist can give advice for your own situation.

Can decay be hidden between two teeth?

Yes, and it is one of the commonest places for it. The Victorian Department of Health gives "possible decay between two touching teeth" as its own example of a problem that is "difficult to see" and may require x-rays. The neighbouring tooth hides the surface where the decay starts, so no amount of careful looking in a mirror will show it.

Why does a check-up include my neck and jaw?

Because the published description of a check-up is wider than a decay inspection. The Department states that soft tissues "are also checked for signs of oral cancer and other possible problems", and that "your dentist may also check your jaw joints and the lymph nodes in your neck". That part of the appointment is the reason to keep it when nothing hurts.

Why does my dentist ask about my medications?

Because they can change both the findings and the treatment. The Department's wording is that "many health conditions have an effect on your oral health and vice versa", and that "some medicines can affect your mouth or need to be taken into consideration before dental treatment". The health questions are part of the examination rather than paperwork.

Can a tooth need treatment with no pain at all?

Yes. The Department states that "sometimes, tooth pulp may become damaged or diseased without any symptoms", and that these cases are "usually diagnosed by special tests or x-rays during a dental check-up or treatment for other dental concerns". No symptoms is not the same as no problem.

Could I need more than a filling?

Possibly, and some of the signs overlap. Sensitivity to hot and cold and pain when biting appear on the Department's published list of symptoms of damaged or diseased tooth pulp, alongside unprovoked pain, a loosening tooth, gum swelling, oozing pus and facial swelling. The last two are not symptoms to monitor at home — if either applies, be seen promptly rather than waiting for a routine appointment.

Related services and further reading

Fillings and restorations

What happens when you get a dental filling

Difference between silver and white fillings

Dental check-ups

Main symptoms and signs of toothache

Root canal therapy

Emergency dentistry

Why clean between the teeth

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.

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 at 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

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What are the signs of needing a filling?

Signs include toothache, a rough or jagged edge felt with your tongue, a visible hole, pain when chewing and floss that frays. Core Dental dentists examine your teeth to confirm whether a filling is needed.

Can tooth decay be present without pain?

Yes. Not everyone feels pain or sees a hole before decay needs treatment. Core Dental recommends regular comprehensive check-ups so our dentists can find decay early, sometimes with X-rays.

How do X-rays help find tooth decay?

X-rays show teeth in cross-section, and dark spots may indicate decay that cannot be seen by eye. Core Dental dentists use them when clinically appropriate to help diagnose decay and other conditions.

What does a Core Dental dentist check at a check-up?

Our dentists look at your whole mouth, including the tongue, cheeks, gums and jaws, before examining each tooth. They may take X-rays and perform other tests to help diagnose decay and other oral conditions.

Why is it important to treat decay early?

Early treatment stops decay reaching the nerve and blood vessels in the middle of the tooth. Untreated decay may lead to nerve inflammation, root canal treatment or extraction, so Core Dental encourages prompt review.

What happens if a tooth is left with untreated decay?

Decay can become more severe and move closer to the nerve, causing inflammation and possibly nerve death or tooth loss. Core Dental dentists can explain the treatment options if this has occurred.

Does Core Dental offer emergency appointments for tooth pain?

Core Dental reserves emergency appointments where possible across its nine Melbourne clinics. Call 13 13 16 and describe your symptoms. For breathing or swallowing difficulty or serious facial injury, call 000.

How do I book a check-up or filling at Core Dental?

Call 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au. We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans. Clinics are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.