What Happens When You Get a Dental Filling? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/what-happens-when-you-get-a-dental-filling/

Details:

A dentist suggests a dental filling when they detect decay in a tooth that has progressed to a stage that cannot be reversed. At Core Dental the dentist first numbs the area with a local anaesthetic, often after applying a topical numbing gel, then removes the decayed part of the tooth and places a filling material to restore its shape and function. Your dentist will explain each step and the material options before treatment starts.

Why would a dentist suggest you need a filling?

A dentist suggests a filling when decay has progressed to a stage that is irreversible. Early decay can sometimes be managed with fluoride, better home care and monitoring, but once the tooth structure has broken down, the decayed part needs to be removed and the tooth restored. Left untreated, decay can spread deeper into the tooth and may lead to pain, infection or the need for more extensive treatment such as a root canal or extraction.

Your dentist will usually show you the area, explain what they have found, and talk through your options. Our team can also explain the cost before treatment starts.

How are you kept comfortable during a filling?

The dentist uses a local anaesthetic to numb the area. A topical anaesthetic, which is a numbing gel, is often applied beforehand so you feel less of the injection. Once the area is numb, you should not feel pain during the procedure, although you may notice pressure, vibration or sound.

If you feel nervous, tell our team when you book or at the start of your appointment. We can take time to explain what is happening, check that you are comfortable and pause if you need a break.

How does the dentist remove tooth decay before placing a filling?

The dentist uses a small dental drill to remove the decayed portion of the tooth, leaving only healthy tooth structure behind. Water is often used while drilling to cool the tooth and clear away debris, and the dental nurse uses suction to remove excess water from the mouth. This is why the appointment can feel a little noisy and wet, even though the tooth itself is numb.

Once the decay is removed, the dentist shapes the cavity and prepares the tooth to receive the filling material.

Why might a dentist use a rubber dam or cotton rolls?

A dentist may use a rubber dam, which is a thin sheet that surrounds the tooth, or cotton rolls to keep the tooth dry throughout the restoration process. This matters because some filling materials will only stick to the tooth structure if the area is isolated and dry. You can read more in our article on what a dental dam is and why it is used .

What types of materials are used for dental fillings?

Dental fillings can be made from several materials, and the right choice depends on the tooth, the size of the cavity, your bite and your preferences.

Composite resin is tooth-coloured and made from silica and a plastic resin. It is the material most commonly placed today.

Porcelain may be used when appearance is important or extra strength is needed.

Amalgam is a silver-coloured material that contains mercury. It is used less commonly today.

Gold is strong and durable.

Your dentist will explain which materials are suitable for your tooth and the advantages and limitations of each. You can also read about the difference between silver and white fillings and the difference between a crown and a porcelain filling .

What should you expect after a filling?

Once the anaesthetic wears off, your tooth and gum may feel a little tender, and your bite may feel slightly different for a short time. Many people notice some sensitivity to hot, cold or biting pressure in the first days. Ask your dentist how long to wait before eating and which foods to avoid while your mouth is numb, so you do not accidentally bite your cheek or tongue.

If your bite feels high, or sensitivity does not settle, let us know so we can check the filling. See our article on tooth sensitivity after a filling for more.

How do you plan your care with our team?

A useful first step is to explain your concern, symptoms, timing and treatment goals when you book. Bring relevant medical information and a current medicines list. Your dentist can then assess your teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, request imaging when clinically appropriate, and explain which options are suitable.

Ask what the recommended approach is intended to achieve, whether there are reasonable alternatives, what preparation and aftercare involve, and what risks or limitations apply. Treatment time, fees, recovery and maintenance vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care. A written treatment plan can help you compare stages, expected appointments and payment arrangements before you proceed.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, breathing or swallowing difficulty, serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. Do not wait for a dental appointment in these situations. For severe tooth pain or swelling without these emergency signs, contact us promptly. Review intervals should be tailored to your individual oral health risks.

How can we help?

If you think you may need a filling, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental practices. Call 13 13 16 or book online. You can read more about fillings and restorations or our emergency dentistry care .

The procedure, step by step from the published description

The state health advice describes what a filling appointment involves in a few short sentences, and they answer the two questions people actually have: will it hurt, and what is being put in.

Numbing comes first, if needed. The Victorian Department of Health: "If needed, they will numb the tooth first with local anaesthetic to make sure you are comfortable throughout the process."

If needed — so it is not automatic, and it is a conversation rather than an assumption.

Then the decay comes out, and only then does anything go in. "Once all decay has been removed, the hole in the tooth is cleaned and dried, and then filled with a filling material." Its dental treatment page describes the same sequence: the dentist "removes decay from the tooth, cleans the cavity, dries and seals it with a filling material."

Cleaned and dried before filling, because the material has to bond to a clean surface.

What a filling is for, and the honest limit on it. "Dental fillings are used to repair worn, decayed or damaged teeth. They are made from materials that can 'fill' in parts of a damaged tooth and then be set hard." And: "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."

Cannot completely repair all damage. That is the Department's own framing, and it is the reason the next section matters.

The materials, with the Department's own notes. Its list: "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."

On choosing between them, it declines to rank: "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."

On amalgam and mercury , since it is the question that comes up. The Department's own heading is "Amalgam ('silver') fillings are safe", and its statement is: "Some people have concerns about dental amalgam fillings because they contain mercury." Then: "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."

That is the Victorian Department of Health's position, and we attribute it to them rather than to anyone else.

Why an x-ray may be taken first. "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." And more bluntly: "X-rays are often needed to diagnose decay as it can occur in areas not visible to the naked eye", since "a tooth can appear intact from the outside".

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); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

After the appointment: what a filling does not do

Two published statements change how people think about a filling, and both are worth reading before you leave the chair.

It does not stop the disease. "Just filling a hole will not stop tooth decay from occurring in other areas of the mouth or around the new filling. So, if your dentist has found tooth decay, focus on the things that you can do to prevent further decay in the future."

Around the new filling. The margin where new material meets old tooth is where cleaning matters most, and the Department's figure on what brushing alone misses applies there: without floss or an interdental brush, "up to a third of each tooth doesn't get cleaned".

It does not last forever. "All fillings need to be replaced eventually. Regular dental check-ups can help ensure fillings that are worn out due to chewing are found and fixed." We are not going to publish a lifespan for any material, because the Department gives none.

And if one comes out. "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."

As soon as possible rather than at the next check-up.

The best filling is the one not needed, and the Department says so. "An intact tooth is stronger than a filled one, so it's important to try and avoid fillings due to tooth decay." And on timing: "Finding decay in the early stages means less of your tooth needs to be repaired in the process of getting a filling."

Less of your tooth needs to be repaired. That is the concrete benefit of coming in early, stated in the right unit.

Its prevention list is short. "Brushing your teeth twice a day"; "using fluoride toothpaste"; "enjoying a wide variety of nutritious foods"; "choosing tap water over sugary drinks."

And early decay can still be reversed. "Early tooth decay is reversible. Saliva can deposit mineral back onto the tooth surface, and improvements in your diet and oral hygiene make a big difference." Its first sign is "a chalky white spot on the tooth", at which stage "the decay process can be reversed", and "your dentist can treat early areas of tooth decay with fluoride or other products to help with this process". The window for that is why the Department ties check-ups to avoiding fillings: "Regular visits to the dentist (every 6 to 12 months) are important so that decay can be identified at this early stage when a filling can be avoided."

One thing to watch for afterwards. If a filled tooth starts aching, the Department's root canal page notes that "decay beneath a deep filling" is among the causes of pulp damage, and that symptoms include "unprovoked or spontaneous pain", "sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods" and "pain when biting or chewing". Persistent pain in a filled tooth is worth reporting rather than waiting out.

And on children, the published starting point. "Children should have their first dental check-up by 1 year of age. Ask your dental practitioner how often you should have a dental check-up."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental fillings, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025); Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 2025); Root canal treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 14 July 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Does a dental filling hurt?

The area is numbed with local anaesthetic first, often after a numbing gel, so you should not feel pain during the procedure. You may feel pressure or vibration. Tell your dentist straight away if you feel any discomfort and they can adjust your anaesthetic.

How long does a filling appointment take?

The time varies with the size and position of the cavity and the material used. Your dentist can give you an estimate when they examine your tooth. Small fillings are often completed in a single visit.

Why is my filling tooth-coloured?

Composite resin is tooth-coloured and can be matched to the shade of your natural tooth. It is the material most commonly placed today, and your dentist will discuss whether it suits your tooth.

What if my filling falls out or breaks?

Contact us as soon as you can. Keep the area clean and avoid chewing on that side. Our article on what to do if a temporary filling falls out has more detail.

Will I be numbed for a filling?

If it is needed. The Victorian Department of Health: "If needed, they will numb the tooth first with local anaesthetic to make sure you are comfortable throughout the process."

What is the actual sequence?

"Once all decay has been removed, the hole in the tooth is cleaned and dried, and then filled with a filling material." Its dental treatment page describes the dentist removing "decay from the tooth", cleaning the cavity, then drying and sealing it "with a filling material".

Which filling materials are available?

The Department lists "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)"; and "porcelain".

Which material is best?

The published advice does not rank them: "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."

Are amalgam fillings safe?

The Victorian Department of Health's own heading is "Amalgam ('silver') fillings are safe", and its statement is that "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".

Why might I need an x-ray first?

Because the decay may not be visible. "X-rays are often needed to diagnose decay as it can occur in areas not visible to the naked eye", and "a tooth can appear intact from the outside". The Department also lists "possible decay between two touching teeth, or an infection" as examples where "x-rays may be needed".

Does a filling stop decay coming back?

No. "Just filling a hole will not stop tooth decay from occurring in other areas of the mouth or around the new filling."

How long will a filling last?

The Department gives no figure for any material. What it says is that "all fillings need to be replaced eventually. Regular dental check-ups can help ensure fillings that are worn out due to chewing are found and fixed."

What if my filling falls out?

Do not wait for the next check-up. "If part of your filling breaks off or if your whole filling falls out, see your oral health professional as soon as possible."

Is it better to catch decay before it needs a filling?

Yes, and in a measurable way: "Finding decay in the early stages means less of your tooth needs to be repaired in the process of getting a filling." The Department also notes that "an intact tooth is stronger than a filled one", and that regular visits "every 6 to 12 months" matter "so that decay can be identified at this early stage when a filling can be avoided".

Can early decay be reversed without a filling?

Sometimes. "Early tooth decay is reversible. Saliva can deposit mineral back onto the tooth surface, and improvements in your diet and oral hygiene make a big difference", and "your dentist can treat early areas of tooth decay with fluoride or other products to help with this process".

What if a filled tooth starts aching later?

Report it. The Department lists "decay beneath a deep filling" among the causes of pulp damage, and its symptoms include "unprovoked or spontaneous pain", "sensitivity to hot and cold drinks and foods" and "pain when biting or chewing".

Related services and further reading

Fillings and restorations

General dentistry

How do I know if I need a filling?

Tooth sensitivity after a filling

What to do if a temporary dental filling falls out

Is it possible to have an allergic reaction to an amalgam filling?

What is a dental dam?

Difference between a crown and a porcelain filling

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, with Monday to Friday hours to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, Sunday closed

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.

Why would a dentist recommend a filling?

A dentist recommends a filling when decay in a tooth has progressed to a stage that cannot be reversed. At Core Dental our dentists examine the tooth, explain what they find and talk through your options before starting.

How does Core Dental keep patients comfortable during a filling?

Our dentists numb the area with a local anaesthetic, often after applying a topical numbing gel. You should not feel pain during the filling. Tell our Core Dental team if you feel nervous so we can take extra care.

How do dentists remove decay before a filling?

The dentist uses a small dental drill to remove the decayed portion and leave healthy tooth structure. Water is often used to cool the tooth, and the dental nurse uses suction. Core Dental dentists then place the filling material.

Why do dentists keep the tooth dry during a filling?

Some filling materials stick to the tooth structure only if the area is isolated and dry. Dentists may use a rubber dam or cotton rolls for this reason, and our Core Dental dentists choose what suits each tooth.

What materials can Core Dental dentists use for fillings?

Fillings can be made from composite resin, porcelain, amalgam or gold. Composite resin is tooth-coloured and is the material most commonly placed today. Your Core Dental dentist will explain which options suit your tooth.

What is composite resin made from?

Composite resin is tooth-coloured and made from silica and a plastic resin. Core Dental dentists can match its shade to your natural tooth, and will discuss whether it is suitable for the size and position of your cavity.

How do I book a filling at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. We have nine clinics across Melbourne, open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings. Tell us if you have pain so we can plan your visit.

Can I spread the cost of a filling at Core Dental?

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans. Ask the Core Dental team about eligibility and terms when you book, and for larger treatment plans we can provide a written plan to compare stages and costs.