

WHY DENTISTS KEEP USING AMALGAM FILLINGS

Dental amalgam ('silver fillings') have been used as a reliable, efficient, long-lasting and safe filling material for over 100 years. While you may have seen or heard commentary suggesting that the use of dental amalgam fillings is dangerous, rest assured these comments are not supported by scientific fact. Health experts and institutions world-wide support the use of amalgam fillings.

MYTH BUSTERS

MYTH: Dental amalgam is the same as mercury, which seeps into your mouth and poses a significant health risk.

FACT: Amalgam is not the same as mercury. There is mercury in amalgam, but not in pure form as it is bound in 'intermetallic compounds' of silver, tin and copper. Once the amalgam filling has set, there is no liquid mercury present, and it does not present a health risk.

"FDA considers dental amalgam fillings safe for adults and children ages 6 and above. The amount of mercury measured in the bodies of people with dental amalgam fillings is well below levels associated with adverse health effects."

US Food and Drug Administration (2009)

What is a filling and why do I need to have one?

When a tooth is decayed or damaged due to trauma, your dentist restores the original tooth shape and function with a filling. This may be done with a variety of materials such as amalgam, tooth-coloured fillings or even crowns. Your dentist will recommend the best filling material based on how strong the remaining tooth is, the strength of material needed to restore the tooth and how heavy the bite is.

"The current data are insufficient to support an association between mercury release from dental amalgam and the various complaints that have been attributed to this restoration."

Life Sciences Research Office, USA (2004)

Why don't dentists just use the white fillings?

Tooth-coloured fillings, for example 'resin composite' and 'glass-ionomer' may be an alternative to amalgam fillings. However, choosing tooth-coloured fillings because they are more discrete than amalgam fillings may not be in the best interests of your tooth. Resin composites and glass-ionomers can be technically more difficult to place, more expensive and may not last as long as amalgam.

I already have an amalgam filling, should I have it replaced with resin composite or glass-ionomer?

Replacing any filling unnecessarily or for improved appearance results in additional tooth substance loss and

"It is concluded however, that there is no scientific evidence for (sic) risks of adverse systemic effects exist and the current use of dental amalgam does not pose a risk of systemic disease. The main exposure to mercury in individuals with amalgam restorations occurs during placement or removal of the fillings. The removal of amalgam restorations will transiently increase the exposure of individual patients to relatively high levels of mercury and there is no clinical justification for removing clinically satisfactory amalgam restorations, except in patients suspected of having allergic reactions to amalgam constituents."

European Commission's Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified HealthRisks (2008)

weakening of the remaining tooth structure. Unless there is a legitimate dental need to replace your filling, you are better off keeping the one you have got. Talk to your dentist if you are unsure.

"... current evidence does not indicate that dental amalgam is causing illness in the general population.' and 'A total ban on amalgam is not considered justified. Neither is the removal of sound amalgam fillings in patients who have no indication of adverse health effects attributable to mercury exposure."

Health Canada (2006)

Do dentists using dental amalgam damage the environment?

Amalgam which finds its way into the environment may eventually break down and release mercury. The Australian Dental Association and the FDI World Dental Federation recommend the use of devices, which comply with the international standard, to trap any excess amalgam that may result from placing of new fillings or the removal of existing ones. By making sure your dentist uses a recommended system for collection and disposal of scrap amalgam, you, your dentist and the entire dental team are protecting the environment from mercury contamination.

What should I do if I'm not sure?

The first step should always be to talk to your dentist. Ask any questions you have about amalgam or alternative filling materials until you are comfortable you have selected the option that is best for you.

If you need any more information you can contact the ADA on 02 9906 4412.