


# Taking Care of Cavities



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CANADIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION  
DENTAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

# Taking Care of Cavities

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When you go for a check-up, one of the things your dentist looks for is tooth decay, also known as a cavity. If you have a cavity and it needs a filling, there are different kinds of fillings to do the job.

## Here's what you will learn about in this booklet:

- ▶ *The choices you have* page 2
- ▶ *How a cavity forms* page 3
- ▶ *How fillings are done* page 5
- ▶ *Kinds of fillings* page 6



# The choices you have

Your dentist cares about you and your oral health. If you have questions or concerns about the kind of fillings that are used in your mouth, talk to your dentist.

Each kind of filling has pros and cons. What you choose depends on your needs. When something foreign is put into your body, there is always the chance of side effects, such as an allergy. For every filling material, there are a few people who are allergic to it. The good that comes from using a material must be greater than the risks. For most people,

treating disease and repairing damage in the mouth are much more important to good health than any drawbacks from the fillings.

Before you get a filling, you should tell your dentist about changes to your health since your last visit:

- Are you taking medicine?
- Do you have allergies?
- Are you pregnant?

Your dentist can suggest the kind of filling that is best for you. But the final choice is yours.

## Health Canada's Role

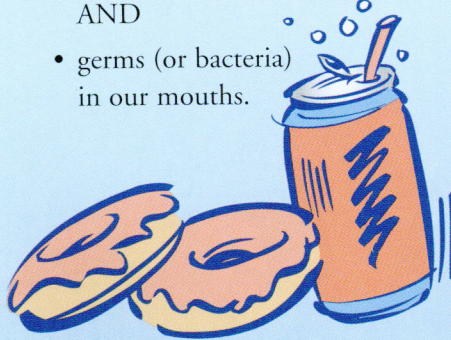
One of Health Canada's jobs is to make sure that dental fillings and dental tools are safe. The Canadian Dental Association supports Health Canada's role in making sure Canadians receive the best possible care when they visit their dentist.



# How a cavity forms

A cavity is a very small hole that forms on the surface of a tooth. Cavities are caused when two things mix together:

- sugars in the food we eat, AND
- germs (or bacteria) in our mouths.



When these things meet inside your mouth, they produce a mild acid. This acid can eat away at the hard, outer layer of your teeth (called enamel).

Cavities are more common during childhood, but adults can get them too. Adults tend to get 2 kinds of cavities:

**1** Cavities that form around a filling, or “recurrent” cavities. Fillings are not as smooth as natural teeth. Tiny bits of food and germs (bacteria) can get caught at the edge of a filling. This can cause a cavity to form again on the tooth around the filling. Also, when a filling breaks, the part of the tooth that is no longer covered is more likely to get a cavity.

**2** Cavities that form on the roots of the teeth, or “root” cavities. Years of brushing your teeth too hard can make your gums **recede**, or pull away from your teeth. Getting older can also make gums **recede**. When your gums pull away from your teeth, the roots of the teeth are out in the open. Roots do not have a hard, outer layer (enamel) to protect them, so they are more likely to get cavities.

When you go for a check-up, your dentist checks your fillings and may suggest that you replace any loose or broken ones. Your dentist also checks for signs of decay, such as brown or black spots. Your dentist may want to use x-rays to take a closer look at problem spots.

If you have a cavity, your dentist may:

- keep an eye on it (if it's small), OR
- want to fill it right away.

If a large cavity is not filled, it can get bigger and cause pain. The tooth may even have to be removed and replaced with a false (or **artificial**) tooth.



# How fillings are done

To fill a cavity, your dentist may first give you “freezing” (or **local anesthetic**) so you do not feel any pain. Your dentist then takes out all traces of decay. Your dentist shapes the hole and fills it with the kind of filling you need and want.

There are 2 main ways fillings are done:

**1 Direct Filling.** These fillings go right into the cavity, after your dentist has cleaned out the decay. Amalgam (or silver) fillings and plastic (or white) fillings are examples of direct fillings. They harden quickly. Most of the time, you will be able to have a direct filling put in place in 1 appointment.

**2 Indirect Filling.** Examples of this type of filling are crowns (or caps) and inlays. They are made in a lab to fit your tooth alone. Your dentist cements the filling in place. Most indirect fillings take 2 or more appointments to complete.



# Kinds of fillings

## METAL FILLINGS

### ▶ DENTAL AMALGAM FILLINGS

These are sometimes called “silver” fillings. They are the most common kind of filling used in Canada today. Because these fillings are silver in colour, they are used to fill back teeth. They are a mix of metals such as mercury, silver, copper and tin.

#### **Pros:**

- These are the least expensive type of filling.
- They last a long time.
- They are easy to put in place. (Since they are a direct filling, one visit to your dentist will do the job, in most cases.)

#### **Cons:**

- The silver colour may not appeal to people who want a “natural” look.
- Tiny amounts of mercury are released from the filling when you chew. For most people, this is nothing to worry about. Studies have shown that amalgam fillings do not cause illness. They have been used on people for more than 150 years.
- Health Canada has advised that pregnant women in need of a filling may want to wait until the baby is born before they go ahead. Your dentist can suggest other kinds of fillings, if the work is urgent.

## ► CAST GOLD FILLINGS

These are based on a model (or cast) of your tooth. Cast gold fillings are a mixture of gold with other metals such as silver and copper. These other metals make gold fillings more durable.

A cast gold filling is made in a dental lab and sent back to your dentist, who cements it in place in your mouth. You will need at least 2 visits to the dentist to get the job done.

During the first visit, your dentist cleans out all the decay and makes a mold of your tooth. The hole is filled with a temporary filling. Meanwhile in a dental lab, the mold of your tooth is used to make a model. A filling that is the same size and shape as your tooth is built based on the model. When you go back to the dentist a couple of weeks later, your dentist cements the gold filling in place.

### **Pros:**

- Gold is stronger than amalgam.
- Gold fillings last a long time.

### **Cons:**

- Gold costs more than other kinds of fillings.
- Gold fillings and crowns are indirect fillings, so they take at least 2 appointments.
- The gold colour may not appeal to people who want a "natural" look.



## TOOTH-COLOURED FILLINGS

### ▶ COMPOSITE FILLINGS

These are also called plastic or white fillings. Getting this kind of filling depends on where the tooth is in your mouth. We bite down hard on our back teeth (molars), so a plastic filling may not be a good choice here. Talk to your dentist about your other choices.

To do the job, your dentist cleans all decay from the tooth and puts a glue (or bonding material) on the inside of the hole. Composite resin is put into the hole in thin layers. Each layer gets hard with the help of a special light that your dentist holds over the tooth. When the last layer of the filling is hard, your dentist shapes the filling so it looks and feels natural.

#### **Pros:**

- These fillings will be the same colour as your natural teeth.
- They cost less than gold fillings.
- They are direct fillings, so they can be done in 1 appointment in most cases.

#### **Cons:**

- This kind of filling can break more easily than amalgam or gold fillings, and they may not last as long.
- They cost more than amalgam fillings.
- Recurrent decay is more of a problem than with amalgam or gold fillings.

### ▶ GLASS IONOMER MATERIALS

These are only used in teeth where you do NOT bite down hard.

There have not been many studies about how long this kind of filling lasts. Newer forms of the filling may be stronger and may last longer. Research is underway to tell us more.

#### **Pros:**

- These fillings are the same colour as your natural teeth.

- They contain fluoride, which helps stop recurrent decay in the tooth.
- They do NOT have to be put in layer by layer. This makes it simpler than putting in composite resins.
- They are direct fillings and can be done in 1 appointment, in most cases.
- They cost less than gold fillings.

**Cons:**

- They are not as strong and will not last as long as other fillings.
- They cost more than amalgam fillings.

► **PORCELAIN MATERIALS**

These are the most common kind of dental ceramic used by dentists. They are hard and brittle.

Porcelain and metal can be combined to make a strong, tooth-coloured crown. The crown is based on a model of your tooth. It is made in a dental lab in much the same way as a cast gold filling or crown is made. Unless you have a bad tooth grinding habit or some other problem, a combination of porcelain and metal can be used anywhere in the mouth.

**Pros:**

- Dental porcelain is the same colour as natural teeth.
- These fillings last a long time.

**Cons:**

- For teeth that bite down hard, like molars, ceramics are not a good choice. Fillings can break.
- They are indirect fillings, so at least 2 appointments will be needed.
- They cost more than most other types of fillings.

*This booklet should not replace regular dental visits. If you have questions about your oral health or the contents of this booklet, please talk to your dentist.*