

Silver fillings



What are they?

A filling replaces part of a tooth that has been lost because of decay or through accidental damage.

'Silver' fillings are made of dental amalgam - a mixture of mercury with other metals, including silver, tin and copper. Amalgam is soft at first, but quickly becomes hard once placed in the tooth. Dentists use amalgam because it is tough and safe. However, there are alternatives to amalgam such as white fillings.

What will my dentist do?

Your dentist will:

- Usually numb the tooth and surrounding area with an injection - some small fillings may not need an anaesthetic.
- Remove any decay, together with any old filling material, using a small, high-speed drill.
- Remove any weak part of the tooth that might break later.
- Shape the cavity, so that the tooth will hold the filling in place.
- Possibly put a cement lining in the bottom of the cavity before inserting the filling.

- Pack soft amalgam tightly into the cavity - you might hear a squeaking noise as it goes in. The dentist might put a thin metal band around the tooth prior to packing in the amalgam to help control the shape of the filling.
- Carve the filling to fit the tooth.
- Ask you to close your teeth together gently, to check that the filling is the right height and is comfortable.
- Make any necessary small adjustments to the filling at the next visit.

What are the benefits?

- A filling rebuilds the tooth so you can chew. Fillings need to be kept clean with good oral hygiene practice to prevent further decay.
- If decay is left unchecked, it can spread deep into the tooth, causing pain and infection. This could mean the tooth has to be root filled or even taken out.
- A filling can prevent further toothache or discomfort.
- Silver fillings are very strong and perform well in back teeth, where there is heavy wear from chewing. They do, however, have the cosmetic drawback of not being tooth coloured. Tooth coloured filling materials, which look better, require less drilling and can be repaired, are also available, but take longer to place and may wear less well than silver fillings. Silver fillings are best used when existing silver fillings need to be replaced and in situations where the use of a tooth coloured filling material is difficult.

Advice is available from the Scottish Dental Clinical Effectiveness Programme to help you and your dentist decide which is the most suitable filling material for your situation (sdcep.org.uk/published-guidance/dental-amalgam).