

HEALTH

Be informed about amalgam dental fillings

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CONTRIBUTOR

About half the dentists in the U.S. still use metal amalgam for fillings. These “silver” fillings contain about 50 percent mercury, to make the tin, silver and copper ingredients more workable.

Mercury, though, has been shown to be

toxic. Specifically, mercury is a neurotoxin.

There is hot debate about whether mercury is dangerous in dentistry now.

The debate is about how much mercury gets into a patient's system from eating, drinking and brushing; how much mercury a person can tolerate without ill effects; and whether mercury waste from dental offices is the number one or number two cause of mercury pollution in natural waters.

Amalgam or “silver” fillings have been in use for more than 160 years, and mercury is what makes that amalgam bond together and mold to the shape it must fill.

Amalgam has been a handy solution, too, because it is tough enough to take on the job of filling molars, where the full power of the jaw is felt in chewing.

On the other hand, living parts of a tooth have to be drilled away to make a seat for the amalgam filling.

Then heat and cold cause that amalgam to expand and contract,

causing cracks in the tooth it is there to fill.

So amalgam fillings last a long time, but the tooth they leave behind when it is time to replace them is usually in worse shape than before.

Resin-based composites are more “tooth-friendly,” especially for filling high visibility teeth near the front. Composites can blend unnoticeably with the rest of your smile.

Porcelain caps have been the best solution for molars because of their peak durability. But they might not be right for every patient's budget, so some have seen metal amalgams as filling an important gap for affordability.

A better option in many cases for restoring those high-load locations when caps are not considered may be porcelain inlays. A porcelain inlay can put the

durability of porcelain right where you need it, without capping the whole tooth.

Research recently reported that more than 90 percent of dental patients want to be informed about mercury and amalgams – and given the choice.

The study showed that more than 70 percent of patients, though, are not aware when mercury amalgams are used. Amalgams were in such common use for so long that the dialogue between dentist and patient is lagging behind the patient's desire to make an informed choice.

Talk to your dentist to become more informed about your options.

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