



# Filling the Gap

In this world, nothing lasts forever. Children grow up and leave home, starting their own lives. Cars pass the 100,000-mile mark and eventually sputter out. Your spring break vacation comes and goes far too quickly. And sadly, the same can be said for one of the most common dental treatments: fillings. So even if your tooth doesn't hurt and that filling you got when you were 15 years old is still in place, you may be surprised when your dentist tells you that it needs to be replaced. Dental fillings may last many years, according to the American Dental Association, but all fillings will need to be replaced eventually.

Why is that? Contrary to popular belief, dental fillings are not permanent. And pain is not always a symptom of dental decay or infection. There may be a number of reasons why you would need a filling replaced.

The most common reason is recurrent decay or decay around an existing filling. Over time, due to chewing forces, fillings or enamel may begin to chip away around the edges of the tooth. This chipping is not visible to the naked eye. Clenching and grinding your teeth can also contribute to weakening the filling.

Additionally, one of the properties of the older silver fillings is dimensional change, similar to expansion and contraction, and this is caused by exposure to moisture and temperature changes. As a result, fluid and bacterial plaque may seep into the openings caused by expansion and contraction and could eventually reach the nerve. This could lead to infection, abscess, cysts, inflammation, and even facial swelling.

Decay that is undiagnosed and untreated can progress to infect dental pulp (the layer of the tooth that contains its nerve and blood supply), which can result in the need for a root canal or possibly even loss of the tooth.

And occasionally, this could all happen without the tiniest bit of discomfort, so you wouldn't even know your tooth was infected. That's why it is recommended that you visit the dentist at least twice a year. At your next cleaning, be sure to ask your dentist or hygienist to examine any fillings you have to be sure they are fully intact. Problems with existing fillings can generally be detected in the early stages, so a thorough examination by your dentist is a good measure to take. Your dentist may opt to take dental radiographs (or X-rays) that help detect any decay under existing fillings or between teeth, two spots that are difficult to check just by looking at the teeth. Preventive dentistry and early detection are the keys to good oral health.

And if you do need to have a filling replaced, you have more choices today than ever before. The most common fillings are either amalgam or composite. Amalgam is a mixture of silver, copper, tin, and mercury, and it is a durable filling that is highly resistant to wear and tear. Composite fillings are a tooth-colored mixture of acrylic resin and finely ground glasslike particles, and they provide durability and resistance to fracture in small-to-midsized restorations that need to withstand moderate chewing pressure. Your dentist can recommend the best type of filling to meet your needs. 



For more information on fillings or your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit our Web site at [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).