

How Long Do Composite Fillings Last?



And what can you do to make sure your dental fillings last as long as they can?

Composite fillings for cavities tend to last for five to ten years before needing replacement. There are many longer-lasting alternatives to composite fillings available, but composite fillings have benefits that, arguably, are more important than durability.

What are fillings?



Image: A young girl next to her dentist. Cavities can happen at any age but are most common for children, teenagers, and older adults.

In dentistry, fillings have a variety of purposes. The most common one is filling a [cavity](#).

A cavity consists of a small area of decayed tissue in the tooth. Cavities are most commonly caused by improper brushing, a sugary diet, and plaque build up, though there are some bacteria that can also contribute to the formation of cavities. Brushing twice a day, flossing regularly, and using mouthwash are the best ways to prevent cavities from occurring.

Cavities, at first, occur in the enamel of the tooth. This is the hard outer layer of the tooth—in fact, it's the hardest material in the entire human body, stronger than bone. The issue rises when the cavities grow larger, and the deeper, more sensitive layers of the tooth are affected.

It is important to treat cavities as soon as possible. If the tooth damage goes unfixed, the small decay can grow into a hole in the tooth. This can lead to extreme pain in the tooth, infection, and eventual loss of the entire tooth.

Thus, when dentists identify a cavity, they want to fill it as soon as possible. If a cavity is not filled, the bacteria that originally caused the decay will only get deeper in the tooth and rot it

even more. Filling a cavity prevents this bacteria from reaching the vulnerable areas of the tooth, as well as saving the patient from pain and infection.

Luckily, filling a cavity is a short, relatively painless procedure. If the cavity is small enough, you may not even need anesthesia.

When you get your cavity filled, one of several materials can be used.

Gold fillings

Gold is a flashy, dazzling material to use for a dental filling, but many people are willing to pay the price. Though they may seem antiquated, gold fillings still very much have their place in the dentist's office.

Gold fillings are very strong and last for up to 15 years. This is because gold is slightly flexible, meaning it can withstand chewing without easily chipping or cracking. In addition, the softness of gold means it has less of a chance of damaging the underlying tooth.

However, gold fillings sometimes take multiple dentist visits to fit correctly—in comparison, most other cavity fillings take place within an hour. They are more expensive than other types of fillings.

Dental amalgam—also known as silver fillings

Silver—specifically, an [amalgam of silver](#) and other metal alloys—used to be the most popular form of fillings. They last about as long as gold fillings, up to fifteen years, and are far more cost-effective than gold. However, you can tell if someone's had a silver filling, as the color is obvious, which makes them unappealing to some.

Dental amalgam is somewhat controversial due to the presence of mercury in the fillings. Though the FDA has approved dental amalgam as safe, since blood mercury levels in patients with silver fillings are only marginally higher than normal, the FDA recommends other types of fillings. They also do not recommend silver fillings for pregnant women, nursing mothers, or young children.

Ceramic (porcelain) fillings

[Ceramic fillings](#) are usually made of porcelain: a white, translucent ceramic originally derived from clay. Due to their white color, ceramic fillings are more subtle than silver and gold fillings, which many patients see as desirable. However, they tend to be more expensive than composite fillings—another white, subtle type of filling. In fact, porcelain fillings are usually around the same price as gold fillings!

Ceramic fillings are durable, long-lasting, and difficult to bleach. They can last even longer than silver or gold fillings, at over 15 years with proper care. As compared with amalgam fillings, which can fluctuate in size due to temperature, ceramic fillings remain a constant size in the mouth and do not cause as much irritation to the teeth.

Composite fillings

Composite fillings are made of resin and have a white color, blending into the natural tooth well. They can be comfortably used to fill cavities in the front teeth—amalgam and gold fillings tend to be used for molars, as they are much more obvious. They last from five to ten years.

Composite fillings are also extremely versatile. Not only can they be used to fill cavities, but they can also fix cracked, chipped, and discolored teeth in a process called dental bonding.

In addition, the process of bonding composite fillings to teeth allows for a much stronger connection. This reduces the likelihood of a leaky filling.

A leaky filling occurs when a tiny breakage between a filling and a tooth appears. Although this is not usually visible, this can be dangerous. Bacteria, food, and saliva can enter the leak, which can wear down the filling and cause harm to the tooth.

Leaky fillings are more common in amalgam fillings. This is due to amalgam fillers being sensitive to temperature. As the fillings shrink because of the cold, breakages can occur in the seal between the tooth and the filling. Composite fillings and ceramic fillings do not have this same risk—though there is still a chance of a leaky filling.

How can you make your fillings last longer?



Image: A toothbrush. Simple oral hygiene is the best way to maintain the health of your fillings.

No one likes going back to the dentist to get their fillings redone. It's expensive, annoying, and takes time out of your day. What are the best ways to take care of your fillings?

1. Brush your teeth twice a day.
2. Floss daily.
3. Limit food and drink with high amounts of sugar, especially sticky foods.
4. Use mouthwash daily.
5. Avoid tobacco products and smoking.
6. Try to minimize drinks that stain your teeth, such as tea, coffee, red wine, and fruit juice.
7. Avoid grinding your teeth.

Eventually, you will have to replace your fillings—no matter what material they are made from, no filling lasts forever. If you're looking to get your fillings replaced, or if you're debating what type of filling to get, schedule a consultation with [Elizabeth Wakim DDS](#).