

Guidelines for Replacing Old Mercury Amalgam Fillings

1. Filling is more than 15 years old. The thermal expansion and contraction of the amalgam fillings over the years results in metal fatigue - all amalgam fillings eventually start to leak around the edges. The larger the filling the quicker it happens. Studies state that between 60% and 80% of all fillings over 15 years old that clinically looked decay free actually had hidden decay under the old filling.*
2. Fracture lines in tooth around the filling. The thermal expansion and contraction of the amalgam fillings over the years also results in cracks in the teeth. The larger the filling the weaker the remaining tooth and the more likely the fracture will result in a broken tooth or possible damage to the nerve.
3. Filling is more than 50% the size of the tooth. Fillings aren't meant to last forever. The average life span of a filling is 14 years plus or minus 13 years. The larger the filling, the shorter the life expectancy. As teeth age, they lose moisture and become more brittle, making them more vulnerable to fractures when there is no support from the filling.
4. Cosmetics. The metal in amalgam fillings causes unsightly stains of the teeth and gums.

5. Possible health concerns. This is still a controversial area of debate as to the possible toxicity of mercury leaking out of amalgam fillings. This is a debate we side step by no longer putting mercury fillings in peoples mouths.

Once the decision to replace a filling is made, the question becomes what material to use. For smaller fillings where there is enough tooth structure to support the filling, white composite fillings work well. On larger fillings where the filling must support the remaining tooth, porcelain or gold is best. Porcelain and gold need two appointments since they are custom made by a laboratory.

* American Journal of Dentistry, Vol. 8 1995. Pg. 280-282.