

What price a dazzling smile?



Anyone who grew up having their teeth cared for by an NHS dentist is more than likely to have at least one silver filling. As long as it is hidden away at the back of your mouth, you might not give it a second thought. But if it's visible when you smile or laugh, you're probably conscious of it and thinking of having it replaced.

We all hanker after a perfect set of white teeth, so it is highly tempting to opt for the long and uncomfortable – not to mention expensive – process of having these mercury-based amalgam fillings removed and replaced with pristine, white composite ones. The end result is a clean, white smile, but for many it can also mean

dental sensitivity and pain as the composite very slightly contracts in the mouth, causing microfractures. The pain may eventually become so bad that your dentist carries out root canal surgery, believing that your symptoms are caused by tooth decay.

So, given that white fillings can cause problems and aren't necessarily all they are cracked up to be, are they worth the trouble?

Sterling silver

Not always, says David Bloom, co-founder of Senova Dental Studios,

a cutting-edge dental practice in Watford, Hertfordshire.

"I often see patients who save up to have their old amalgam fillings replaced," he explains. "This can make a vast improvement to the appearance of the teeth, but patients need to be aware that white fillings have their limitations. They were never designed to replace large areas of amalgam."

According to David, an increasing number of people are opting for replacements when they're not suitable. "The composite used in white fillings is simply not strong enough to fill a hole more than half the width of the tooth, or cover more than one tooth surface," he warns.

"This is because composite contracts slightly when it cures in the mouth, so microfractures can appear and food can get trapped in the gap between neighbouring teeth. The larger the white filling, the more chance that the enormous pressure of biting will cause the weakened tooth surrounding it to fracture," he adds.

In turn, this can lead to pain when eating, and sensitivity to hot and cold – the very symptoms associated with tooth decay. But

when teeth with white composite fillings are X-rayed, there is often no obvious reason for the problem. "Some microscopic cracks in teeth cannot be seen on X-ray," David explains. "So a perplexed dentist will often redo the white fillings, only for the problem to get worse. In the end, one solution is a root canal. But obviously this can sacrifice a healthy tooth and leave it prone to further damage."

The white stuff

But all is not lost for anyone still wanting a set of all-white teeth.

"The good news is that there is an alternative to composite for large amalgam fillings, and that is a ceramic or composite inlay," David explains. "Ceramic is strong, it is custom-made to the size of the cavity left when the old filling is removed and it strengthens the tooth rather than weakening it."

So why don't more dentists offer this material? It's often a matter of cost. While white composite fillings are relatively cheap, starting at around £100 each, ceramic inlays are more expensive, from around £400 to £700. But in the long term they are stronger, will last far longer and are better for your teeth.

Teeth wisdom

If you suffer dental pain after having a white composite filling, your dentist may carry out the following procedures:

- An X-ray to look for fine fractures in the tooth surrounding the white filling, and to rule out decay or an abscess as the cause of pain.
- Pressure tests to gauge your reaction when you bite down on something.
- Hot and cold sensitivity tests.
- Drilling out the white composite fillings to reveal the presence of any cracks.

Treatments may include:

- A temporary dressing and other interventions that should immediately relieve the pain.

- Replacing the filling with a ceramic inlay.
- Replacing with amalgam, if cost is an issue.

After treatment, the pain relief is immediate. "Just half an hour in the dentist's chair can literally change someone's life," says dentist David Bloom.

And he has this advice for anyone loathe to have an amalgam filling put back: "It's better to have an amalgam than a painful composite that's storing up problems for your teeth in the future."

Contact David Bloom at Senova Dental Studios, tel: 01923-233600; www.senovadental.com