

Tooth-colored fillings

Advances in modern dental materials and techniques increasingly offer new ways to create more pleasing, natural-looking smiles. Researchers are continuing their often decades-long work developing esthetically attractive materials, such as ceramic and plastic compounds that mimic the appearance of natural teeth.

Today, more patients ask their dentists about white fillings because they want their teeth to look natural when they laugh, talk and smile. White fillings, also called composite fillings, are made from tooth-colored materials that restore the natural appearance of a decayed or previously filled tooth. Because they blend well with tooth enamel and don't look like fillings, your dentist may recommend them if the teeth to be restored are near the front of your mouth.

A composite filling usually requires only one visit, during which the tooth is prepared and restored. An advantage of composite fillings, as compared with other dental restorations, is that they require less of the healthy part of a tooth to be removed to hold the filling in place. This is due to composite materials' ability to bond to teeth adhesively.

The procedure for a composite filling may take a little longer than those for other types of fillings, because after the decay is removed, the tooth must be kept totally isolated from saliva. The dentist carefully applies an adhesive followed by several thin layers of the tooth-colored composite. Once the filling is in place, it is chemically

hardened, or cured, for less than a minute with a special light.

Composites are preferable for obvious cosmetic reasons, but if the decayed area is large or is subject to heavy chewing pressure, your dentist may recommend another type of material or restoration. Some people may experience some sensitivity to hot and cold temperatures in the newly filled tooth for a few days or as long as a week. If the sensitivity continues beyond that time, contact your dentist.

Other types of white fillings include composite inlays and porcelain inlays and onlays. Inlays and onlays are used to restore teeth that are badly damaged by decay or wear. They may be applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth when esthetics are of concern.

Some white fillings may be more expensive than other dental materials, but most patients find these natural-looking restorations well worth the additional cost. White fillings, like other dental materials, may require periodic replacement. If the edge of the filling eventually pulls away from the tooth, bacteria can get between the filling and the enamel and eventually may cause decay. Tooth decay over time may develop elsewhere on the tooth. Regular dental checkups are important because they allow the dentist to detect a problem in the early stage. ■

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