

Mouth Matters

Dorion on Dentistry



The Amalgam Controversy - Part 1

Silver amalgam fillings have been in use for a hundred years and until the relatively recent improvements in composite resin (tooth coloured plastic filling material) it was the most common type of filling placed by dentists throughout the world. It is durable, easy to place and inexpensive.

Unfortunately dental amalgam has a couple of characteristics that give it a bad rap. Besides the fact that it usually turns an ugly black colour as it corrodes over time, it also expands slightly after several years and has a tendency to crack teeth especially if the filling is a large one. Being a metal the material also reacts with other metals, which in the presence of saliva, creates an electric current just like a battery. This affect is known as galvanism and the resulting galvanic shock is well known to anyone with amalgam fillings who's ever bit dow on tinfoil - yikes.

However, the biggest issue with amalgam is the fact that it contains 50% mercury. There has been in recent years a very passionate debate as to whether or not the amount of mercury vapour produced as we chew on our amalgam fillings is a health hazard. As the debate continues to rage on there has been a significant shift away from amalgam as a filling material. In fact numerous dental practioners have stopped using it altogether.

Mercury is classed as a highly toxic substance which can lead to kidney and central nervous system damage especially with chronic exposure. Some studies have also shown an association

between mercury exposure and heart disease although others have failed to confirm the connection.

It has also been shown that the level of mercury measured in the brain, blood and urine correlates to the number of amalgam fillings in the mouth and these concentrations increase markedly with increased chewing such as occurs with nicotine gum.

Here's where it all gets really confusing. The dental organizations such as the American and Canadian Dental Associations continue to endorse silver amalgam fillings as safe material for most patients because the quantity of mercury vapour released into the body is so minute. In fact, it is considered unethical in Ontario for a dentist to suggest that people have their otherwise sound amalgam fillings removed and replaced with other materials. Yet, last year dentists across Canada were required by law to install special equipment that separates amalgam waste out of their suction systems. That waste then has to be collected and disposed of by a company certified for hazardous waste removal. Failure to comply with the regulations can result in fines and closure of the dental practice.

It defies logic that the same material that's classified as hazardous waste outside the mouth is at the same time considered safe inside. So, who's right? Is amalgam safe or isn't it? - TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK -

Yours for better dental health,

Rae Dorion, DDS

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