



Amalgam

Dental amalgam is the silver-colored material used to fill, or restore, teeth that have cavities. It contains a mixture of metals such as silver, copper and tin, as well as mercury, which binds these components into a hard, stable substance. Dental amalgam has been studied extensively and has been used to restore the teeth of more than 100 million Americans over the past century. Scientific research and major health organizations support the use of dental amalgam as a safe and effective material for dental patients.

In recent years, dental amalgam has drawn the attention of regulators because it contains elemental mercury as a major component, and mercury in certain forms has toxic properties. The mercury in amalgam, however, is contained within a stable, durable alloy with other metals and is not available for release into the body or the environment in any significant amounts. Less than one percent of the mercury released into the environment comes from amalgam.

Nevertheless, the California Dental Association believes it is prudent for dentistry to take steps to reduce the release of amalgam waste or any potentially harmful materials to the environment. Dentistry's role as a health profession naturally includes environmental stewardship, and we encourage and support efforts to reduce amalgam releases through dental office wastewater discharge.

Toward that goal, CDA recommends that all dental offices follow "best management practices" in the handling of their amalgam waste. The list of these practices is available on our website, cda.org. It recommends, among other things, the use of chairside traps to capture amalgam; special training for staff handling mercury-containing material; recycling or proper disposal of amalgam waste; and the use of amalgam separators in areas of the state where mercury in wastewater is a concern.

Dental amalgam use is declining as more patients and dentists choose newer, tooth-colored restorative materials where appropriate. There may come a time when other filling materials eventually replace dental amalgam entirely, but for now, amalgam remains an effective choice for restoring decayed teeth.