

## HOW LONG SHOULD FILLINGS LAST?

Dear Dr. McCrummen: How long should things like fillings and crowns last? M.S.

This is a good question. If you live into your 80's your teeth will have been used almost 30,000 days, or approximately 90,000 meals, not including snacks and gum. Our teeth can be damaged by the unusual things that we do to them. If we use them as a tool, bite our fingernails, crunch ice and hard candy, bite fishing line, open up a bag of sunflower seeds or potato chips with our teeth, bite threads, etc. we can chip, break, and wear them out quickly.

If we do not take care of our teeth properly they can get cavities, which require removal of some hard, protective enamel to get to the decay within the hole. The larger the cavity and filling the weaker the tooth becomes. The repair with a filling is not generally as strong as the natural tooth. For example, a molar can often withstand chewing pressures up to 40,000 pounds per square inch. If a filling covers just one third of the surface, over half of the tooth's natural strength is lost. The tooth can easily crack or break from continued bad habits, or accidents, like biting on a small piece of bone in a hot dog, a walnut shell in a cookie, or sand in a salad. Some foods like un-popped popcorn kernels, beef jerky, Grape Nuts, and Corn Nuts are very hard on teeth.

The best thing is to prevent weakening teeth by taking good care of them daily and using them properly. Thorough brushing and flossing each day, sealing off the susceptible micro-grooves and pits in the tops of the teeth, and using fluoride to harden the teeth, can all help keep your teeth strong and cavity-free. Seeing your dentist and hygienist regularly, helps maintain good health and allows early detection of problems that can be treated when they are small, keeping your teeth stronger and costs down. Teeth should be able to last a lifetime. Since our lives are getting longer, due to modern medicine and healthier habits, we need to be that much more careful and protective of our teeth.

Now, to answer your question of how long repairs should last, understanding the information above, it is very hard to say. It depends on what you chew and how well you take care of your teeth. Generally, if taken care of properly, any restoration (fillings and crowns) placed under ideal conditions, used properly, and no accidents occur, should last at least 5 years. Insurance companies will usually help pay to replace fillings and crowns every 5 years. It is not uncommon to see a repair last 20 to 40 years or more. Perhaps longer now with current techniques and materials; time will tell. "Permanent" in dentistry does not mean "lifelong", it means that it is not meant to come out. No guarantees can be made since the dentist has no control of what is chosen to bite on, or how well their repairs and other teeth are taken care of in general. It is the same with medical procedures, like cardiac bypass surgery, heart valves, joint replacement, shoulder and back repairs, and even like cars, appliances, etc. They must be cared for, and can fail in time.

Regarding a crown, it is glued on with a sealing cement, which is not like using an epoxy. This is because your dentist may need to take the crown off and does not want to damage the tooth. Therefore, a crown can come off if you bit into something extremely sticky. It is usually not the crown that will fail. Replacement is usually due to a cavity at the gumline below the crown, often between teeth and due to not flossing. Some crowns have porcelain on them, which is like glass. It can chip just like anything made of glass, and like your natural teeth can. Fracturing the porcelain is not the fault of the dentist; it is usually because it was over stressed. A small chip can often be smoothed. If too much chips off, the crown may need to be remade.

If you have a cracked or broken tooth or filling, or a loose crown, see your dentist soon to reduce your treatment and costs. It is best to be seen before you have discomfort. Talk to your dental team about what you can do to prevent problems.