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The Dental Board of California

Dental Materials Fact Sheet, Adopted by the Board on October 17, 2001

As required by Chapter 801, Statutes of 1992, the Dental Board of California has prepared this fact sheet to summarize information on the most frequently used restorative dental materials. Information on this fact sheet is intended to encourage discussion between the patient and dentist regarding the selection of dental materials best suited for the patient's dental needs. It is not intended to be a complete guide to dental materials science. The most frequently used materials in restorative dentistry are amalgam, composite resin, glass ionomer cement, resin-ionomer cement, porcelain (ceramic), porcelain (fused-to-metal), gold alloys (noble) and nickel or cobalt-chrome (base-metal) alloys. Each material has its own advantages and disadvantages, benefits and risks. These and other relevant factors are compared in the attached matrix titled "Comparisons of Restorative Dental Materials." A Glossary of Terms¹ is also attached to assist the reader in understanding the terms used. The statements made are supported by relevant, credible dental research published mainly between 1993-2001. In some cases, where contemporary research is sparse, we have indicated our best perceptions based upon information that predates 1993. The reader should be aware that the outcome of dental treatment or durability of a restoration is not solely a function of the material from which the restoration was made. The durability of any restoration is influenced by the dentist's technique when placing the restoration, the ancillary materials used in the procedure, and the patient's cooperation during the procedure. Following restoration of the teeth, the longevity of the restoration will be strongly influenced by the patient's compliance with dental hygiene and home care, their diet and chewing habits. Both the public and the dental profession are concerned about the safety of dental treatment and any potential health risks that might be associated with the materials used to restore the teeth. All materials commonly used (and listed in this fact sheet) have been shown - through laboratory and clinical research, as well as through extensive clinical use - to be safe and effective for the general population. The presence of these materials in the teeth does not cause adverse health problems for the majority of the population. There exist a diversity of various scientific opinions regarding the safety of mercury dental amalgams. The research literature in peer-reviewed scientific journals suggests that otherwise healthy women, children and diabetics are not at increased risk for exposure to mercury from dental amalgams. Although there are various opinions with regard to mercury risk in pregnancy, diabetes, and children, these opinions are not scientifically conclusive and therefore the dentist may want to discuss these opinions with their patients. There is no research evidence that suggests pregnant women, diabetics and children are at increased health risk from dental amalgam fillings in their mouth. A recent study reported in the JADA factors in a reduced tolerance (1/50th of the WHO safe limit) for exposure in calculating the amount of mercury that might be taken in from dental fillings. This level falls below the established safe limits for exposure to a low concentration of mercury or any other released component from a dental restorative material. Thus, while these sub-populations may be perceived to be at increased health risk from exposure to dental restorative materials, the scientific evidence does not support that claim. However, there are individuals who may be susceptible to sensitivity, allergic or adverse reactions to selected materials. As with all dental materials, the risks and benefits should be discussed with the patient, especially with those in susceptible populations. There are differences between dental materials and the individual elements or components that compose these materials. For example, dental amalgam filling material is composed mainly of mercury (43-54%) and varying percentages of silver, tin, and copper (46-57%). It should be noted that elemental mercury is listed on the Proposition 65 list of known toxins and carcinogens. Like all materials in our environment, each of these elements by themselves is toxic at some level of concentration if they are taken into the body. When they are mixed together, they react chemically to form a crystalline metal alloy. Small amounts of free mercury may be released from amalgam fillings over time and can be detected in bodily fluids and expired air. The important question is whether any free mercury is present in sufficient levels to pose a health risk. Toxicity of any substance is related to dose, and doses of mercury or any other element that may be released from dental amalgam fillings falls far below the established safe levels as stated in the 1999 US Health and Human Service Toxicological Profile for Mercury Update. All dental restorative materials (as well as all materials that we come in contact with in our daily life) have the potential to elicit allergic reactions in hypersensitive individuals.

¹ Dental Amalgam. A scientific review and recommended public health service strategy for research, education and regulation, Dept. of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, January 1993.

COMPARISONS OF DIRECT RESTORATIVE DENTAL MATERIAL

COMPARATIVE FACTORS	AMALGAM	COMPOSITE RESIN (DIRECT AND INDIRECT RESTORATIONS)	GLASS-IONOMER CEMENT	RESIN-IONOMER CEMENT
General Description	Self-hardening mixture in varying percentages of a liquid mercury and silver-tin alloy.	Mixture of powdered glass and plastic resin; self-hardening or hardened by exposure to blue light.	Self-hardening mixture of glass and organic acid.	Mixture of glass and resin polymer and organic acid; self-hardening by exposure to blue light.
Principle Uses	Fillings; sometimes for replacing broken portions of teeth.	Fillings, inlays, veneers, partial and complete crowns; sometimes for replacing portions of broken teeth.	Small fillings; cementing metal & porcelain/metal crowns, liners, temporary restorations.	Small fillings; cementing metal & porcelain/metal crowns, and liners.
Resistance to Further Decay	High; self-sealing characteristic helps resist recurrent decay; but recurrent decay around amalgam is difficult to detect in its early stages.	Moderate; recurrent decay is easily detected in early stages.	Low-moderate; some resistance to decay may be imparted through fluoride release.	Low-moderate; some resistance to decay may be imparted through fluoride release.
Estimated Durability (permanent teeth)	Durable.	Strong, durable.	Non-stress bearing crown cement.	Non-stress bearing crown cement.
Relative Amount of Tooth Preserved	Fair; requires removal of healthy tooth to be mechanically retained; No adhesive bond of amalgam to the tooth.	Excellent; bonds adhesively to healthy enamel and dentin.	Excellent; bonds adhesively to healthy enamel and dentin.	Excellent; bonds adhesively to healthy enamel and dentin.
Resistance to Surface Wear	Low; Similar to dental enamel; brittle metal.	May wear slightly faster than dental enamel.	Poor in stress-bearing applications; fair in non-stress bearing applications.	Poor in stress-bearing applications; good in non-stress bearing applications.
Resistance to Fracture	Amalgam may fracture under stress; tooth around filling may fracture before amalgam does.	Good resistance to fracture.	Brittle; low resistance to fracture but not recommended for stress-bearing restorations.	Tougher than glass ionomer; recommended for stress-bearing restorations in adults.
Resistance to Leakage	Good; self sealing by surface corrosion; margins may chip over time.	Good if bonded to enamel; may show leakage over time when bonded to dentin; does not corrode.	Moderate; tends to crack over time.	Good; adhesively bonds to resin, enamel, dentin; post-insertion expansion may help seal the margins.
Resistance to Occlusal Stress	High; but lack of adhesion may weaken the remaining tooth.	Good to excellent depending upon product used.	Poor; not recommended for stress-bearing restorations.	Moderate; not recommended to restore biting surfaces of adults; suitable for short-term primary teeth restorations.
Toxicity	Generally safe; occasional allergic reactions to metal components. However amalgams contain mercury. Mercury in its elemental form is toxic and as such is listed in Prop 65.	Concerns about trace chemical release are not supported by research studies. Safe; no known toxicity documented. Contains some compounds listed on prop 65.	No known incompatibilities. Safe; no known toxicity documented.	No known incompatibilities. Safe; no known toxicity documented.
Allergic or Adverse Reactions	Rare; recommend that dentist evaluate patient to rule out metal allergies.	No documentation for allergic reactions was found.	No documentation for allergic reactions was found. Progressive roughening of the surface may predispose to plaque accumulation and periodontal disease.	No known documented allergic reactions; surface may roughen slightly over time; predisposing to plaque accumulation and periodontal disease if the material contacts the gingival tissue.
Susceptibility to Post-Operative Sensitivity	Minimal; high thermal conductivity may promote temporary sensitivity to hot and cold; Contact with other metals may cause occasional and transient galvanic response.	Moderate; Material is sensitive to dentist's technique; material shrinks slightly when hardened, and a poor seal may cause occasional and recurrent decay and tooth hypersensitivity.	Low; material seals well and does not irritate pulp.	Low; material seals well and does not irritate pulp.
Esthetics (Appearance)	Very poor; not tooth colored; initially silver gray, gets darker, becoming black as it corrodes. May stain teeth dark brown or black over time.	Excellent; often indistinguishable from natural tooth.	Good; tooth colored. Varies in translucency.	Very good; more translucency than glass ionomer.
Frequency of Repair or Replacement	Low; replacement is usually due to fracture of the filling or the surrounding tooth.	Low-moderate; durable material hardens rapidly; some composite materials show more rapid wear than amalgam. Replacement is usually due to marginal leakage.	Moderate; slowly dissolves in mouth; easily dislodged.	Moderate; more resistant to dissolving than glass ionomer, but less than composite resin.
Relative Costs to Patient	Low; relatively inexpensive; actual cost of fillings depends upon their size.	Moderate; higher than amalgam fillings; actual cost of fillings depends upon their size; veneers & crowns cost more.	Moderate; similar to composite resin (not used for veneers and crowns).	Moderate; similar to composite resin (not used for veneers and crowns).
Number of Visits Required	Single visit (polishing may require a second visit).	Single visit for fillings; 2+ visits for indirect inlays, veneers and crowns.	Single visit.	Single visit.