

A not-so-fond farewell to mercury fillings

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Kudos to the federal Food and Drug Administration on the 180-degree reversal of its 30-year policy of defending so-called "silver" dental fillings. What took the agency so long?

Scientists have long known that mercury is extremely toxic and that it can cause permanent neurological damage. This is why pregnant women and women of childbearing age are warned about consumption of mercury-laden fish. Furthermore, science shows that mercury permeates all tissues and organs, including the liver, kidneys and brain. Mercury, whether found in fillings, in fish or in fluorescent lights, is toxic. Here is what else we know:

- Mercury is emitted 24/7 from your dental fillings in a very toxic vapor form;
- the amount of mercury in your brain directly relates to the number of fillings in your mouth;
- mercury is the only toxin to cause the same hallmark changes in a rat's brain as in an Alzheimer's patient's brain;
- mercury from fillings crosses the placenta to the fetus, and is passed to a newborn via the mother's milk; and
- toxicologists state there is no safe level of mercury in the human body.

While the FDA previously banned all over-the-counter medicines using mercury, and state governments have long ago urged citizens to stop using mercury thermometers due to the fear of contamination, many dentists across the country continue filling decayed teeth with the lethal element, refusing to acknowledge even a potential risk.

The American Dental Association has steadfastly maintained that mercury-based amalgams inside the mouth are safe. If that were the case, why, when removed, does the federal Environmental Protection Agency require them to be treated as hazardous waste, with severe penalties if not disposed of properly?

Does the ADA truly believe that a person's mouth is the only safe place to store mercury? Or is the ADA simply afraid of the potential liability?

All materials implanted into a person must be classified by the FDA. After a decade-long battle with petitions, congressional hearings, Scientific Advisory Committee hearings and letters galore, the FDA finally is ready to comply with its own law and will classify mercury amalgam as a medical device. Once this happens, I personally think this will be the end of mercury fillings. The FDA had long ago classified all other dental materials but had refused to classify dental amalgam. No longer.

It took, of course, a lawsuit to finally get the FDA's attention. In April 2006, four nonprofit groups and some state officials filed suit against the FDA, seeking a ban on amalgams. The lawsuit charged that the FDA refused to release its required environmental impact statement about the leading source of mercury in America's wastewater; that it had refused to classify mercury fillings as required by law; and that it had allowed mercury fillings to be sold without classification.

The suit was settled last week with the FDA agreeing to dramatically change its stance on amalgam.

Gone, gone, gone are all of the FDA's claims that no science exists that amalgam is unsafe, or that other countries have acted for environmental reasons only, or that the 2006 Scientific Panel vote affirmed amalgam's safety. Rather, the FDA has taken the position that "dental amalgams contain mercury, which may have neurotoxic effects on the nervous systems of developing children and fetuses."

Are there alternatives to mercury amalgam fillings? Absolutely. There are excellent, environmentally benign composite materials available today for fillings. There are a growing number of professionals who practice mercury-free dentistry. These materials are more aesthetic than "silver" and even help strengthen teeth.

While the ADA continues to lobby in favor of using mercury fillings, consumers should be warned: You have a choice. Don't be pressured by dentists to use amalgams when they are clearly not your best option.

Dentists are not "molar mechanics." Dentistry is a branch of medicine, and this should be understood by patients — and practiced by dentists — as such. Over the past 30 years, I have replaced amalgam fillings in thousands of patients and have witnessed remarkable improvement in their health. Here, I must warn the public — mercury removal may be dangerous; it must be done by a dentist who understands this and takes proper precautions.

Finally, after decades of unnecessary poisoning of our population, we are witnessing the death of mercury fillings.

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