"JUST WATCH IT"?

8 Consequences From Procrastinating on Dental Treatment

DR. DEBRA GRAY KING
“Just Watch It”? - 8 Consequences From Procrastinating on Dental Treatment

In the old days, you may have gone to a dentist who noticed a cavity or other problem in your mouth and said: “We’ll just watch that.” Watch it do what - grow bigger? Destroy your tooth?

So it’s no surprise when patients have often asked me what happens if a filling falls out, or you think you might have a dental issue - Nothing really bad happens, at least nothing that can’t easily be fixed...right? Wrong.

The truth is many people usually wait until they are in pain to address an issue. The problem with that is that by then, it may be too late for the issue to be “simply” resolved.

Let’s say a filling fell out of your tooth. Now, a filling usually doesn’t choose to fall out for no reason, and there is most likely a very good motive! Fillings can fall out due to tooth decay surrounding the filling or because it cracked, or because of the biting forces.

In other words, if a filling falls out, something is wrong and it’s important that a dentist examines it immediately. If the filling was placed recently, your dentist can most likely address the issue at no further cost. If it was an old filling, then you most likely have a cavity or dental decay underneath the filling.

So what could happen if you don’t address dental issues, such as this and others immediately?

Here are eight things that could happen:
1 It Inevitably Gets More Expensive

Putting off restorative work will only get more expensive over time. A two-surface filling is always less expensive than a crown. Any size cavity will quickly spread to other surfaces and grow in size and depth, requiring more complex and extensive treatment (such as root canals and crowns, and sometimes dental implants), thus raising the costs of reparations.

If you are diagnosed with a few cavities at your initial visit or subsequent hygiene visits and decide to wait due to insurance reasons or schedule conflicts, the cost of the filling will most likely double or quadruple, perhaps in just a few weeks - as the bacteria destroying the tooth structure will not stop working based on finances or work schedules.

2 Root Canal

A root canal is needed once tooth decay reaches the pulp or nerve. Even more serious conditions and uncomfortable circumstances exist if tooth decay that has reached the pulp is left unattended for too long.

*Pulpitis* is the irritation of the pulp due to decay close to the pulp, or in direct contact with the pulp.

*Mild or moderate pulpitis* is the inflammation or irritation of the pulp due to decay that is dangerously close to the pulp, but which can still be remedied with filling materials that stimulate the formation of secondary dentin, in order to protect the pulp.
Infectious or severe pulpitis is the irreversible damage to the pulp caused by decay that is in direct contact with the pulp – which leads to a root canal.

You will most likely feel extreme discomfort or acute pain with any type of pulpitis, especially when exposed to sweets, extreme temperatures, or pressure – but you will probably not be able to distinguish between ‘regular’ pulpitis and infectious pulpitis on your own.

Keep in mind however, that there are different levels of pain tolerance for different people. If you have a low pain tolerance (meaning, you cannot withstand that much pain), then it will definitely let you know when something is not right. But if you happen to have a high tolerance for pain (meaning you can withstand a higher degree of pain than some people would be able to), then you could run the risk of severe pulpitis without even knowing it.

This is the main reason why you should never wait to see your dentist once you feel pain, and instead schedule an appointment once you notice a filling fall out or suspect any sort of dental issue– otherwise, it might be too late to salvage the tooth.

When infectious pulpitis is not addressed immediately, you can end up with a periapical abscess (or tooth abscess). This is the formation of pus around the affected area that can cause extreme pain. The abscess will need to be drained and an immediate root canal treatment will need to take place. If the abscess is left untreated, the abscess will require medical attention and antibiotics will only momentarily help the pain.
3 Risk of Fracture or Breakage

Solid objects by default are more durable than hollow ones. The same thing applies to your tooth. Once the decay begins to form a cavity, it weakens the tooth structure and enhances the probabilities for tooth fracture or breakage.

In this instance, a dental restoration, not only helps prevent further decay, but it also provides a solid mass, which reinforces the strength of the tooth each time pressure is applied on it. The filled cavity will provide a more reliable structure, strong and secure, that doesn’t run the risk of collapse at any minor pressure.

4 Sensitivity and Pain

Since fillings are placed when any part of the tooth is destroyed by tooth decay, then that also means that you might be prone to extra sensitivity and pain.

If it is a small restoration involving the enamel (which is the “protector” of the tooth – the hardest and outermost layer) then you risk fast dissemination of the decay throughout the dentin and the pulp (which are less resistant than the enamel).

If it is a filling that was already involving the dentin, then depending on how close it was to the pulp, it may hurt all the time or each time you bite down, eat food, or expose it to hot or cold. At this point, the tooth is still salvageable, if you remove the decay and cover it with a filling.
Once the decay reaches the pulp or nerve however, there is no turning back. The sole solution is a root canal with a crown, or an implant. Other consequences of not taking immediate action:

- The tooth decay may reach the pulp and then you’ll lose the tooth altogether
- An implant, or root canal and crown are more expensive than a filling.
- Crowns will require even more care and maintenance than your real teeth.

5 Difficulty Using White or Tooth-Colored Filling When Repairing the Tooth

White fillings, which are the way to go for aesthetically pleasing results as well as for health reasons (‘silver’ fillings contain mercury), usually adhere more easily to healthy and normal dentin.

Sclerotic dentin is a condition caused by over-exposed dentin to saliva. Once the enamel has been destroyed by decay, the exposed dentin immediately begins its auto-defense mechanism and reacts to fight off bacteria.

There are small tubules inside the dentin that shut off in an effort to try to protect the nerve from the attacking bacteria.

It is more difficult to etch or bond a white filling to the dentin, however, once the dentin tubules have shut off. It can be done, but you’ll always run the risk of a less sturdy filling than had it been bonded to normal dentin. This is yet another reason why it is so important to immediately address restorative needs when they first appear.


**6 Possible Tooth Extraction**

The reality is that, as mentioned earlier, everyone’s pain tolerance is different. If you are the type that has a very high pain tolerance and the tooth happens to be in the back or the decay is in an area not visible to the naked eye, then it may easily go unnoticed. Before you know it, bacteria and decay may create irreparable damage, and due to the high pain tolerance, it will only be noticed once it’s too late.

**Unrestorable damage** is when decay reaches the cement or root of the tooth (the part of the tooth that is inside the gums). When it reaches this level, the sole option is usually tooth extraction (which is more common than you may think!), for that is the part of the tooth that holds it all together, and without it, there is nothing with which to hold a crown, much less a filling.

**7 Bad Breath**

One of the major causes of bad breath is food residue, no matter how large or small. It might even be so small, that it is not perceivable to the eye. And it doesn’t take a lot to cause bad breath.

Basically, the left-over food particles begin their decomposition process quite rapidly, creating new bacteria that eats the food residue and in turn, digests the “food” the bacteria just consumed. This is one of the main reasons dentist always recommend, brushing, flossing and rinsing with mouthwash after each meal!

However, if food is retained due to our natural tooth contouring and crevices, imagine how much more can accumulate with a space larger-than-normal created by tooth decay?

If the food residue is unreachable by toothbrush bristles and has impacted further down each time you chew, then it will remain in the tooth for an indefinite time, greatly contributing to bad breath (not to mention, the decay will continue to grow!).
8 Difficult Hygiene Maintenance

As mentioned earlier, once a filling has fallen out, it most likely left uneven surfaces. The crevices in the uneven surfaces not only make it more difficult for the toothbrush bristles to reach those areas, but also allow bacteria to build and flourish.

*This creates a downward spiral for your oral health.* It usually begins with difficulties to clean areas with decay and can easily end up with a tooth extraction if you don’t address your restorative needs promptly.

What else is stopping you?

For many people, the very idea of going to the dentist office is enough to send chills down their spine. Having a dentist poke around in your mouth and looking for problems can be extremely nerve wrecking. Even if you aren't necessarily afraid to visit your dentist’s office, you may still experience feelings of dread as you anticipate the overall discomfort of being the recipient of dental work. Though it may not be the top of your list of fun things to do, going to the dentist is necessary for overall health and confidence.

Some people can muster the strength to "grin and bear it" by forcing themselves to make an appointment (and actually show up!) with their dentist office. There are those, however, who simply dread visiting the dentist so much that they may put off the experience for years!

This avoidance can lead to serious health complications due to poor oral hygiene. It is for this reason that advancements have been made in dental technologies. *Sedation dentistry* is the ideal way for individuals who dread the dentist office to have their teeth cared for in the most relaxing way possible.
Our top priority here at the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry is you, the patient. We are only comfortable if you are comfortable. We use a variety of techniques to help you relax and even enjoy your visit with us. *We tailor your sedation needs specifically to you and to your preferences.* Our highly trained professional staff members are among the best in today's dentistry field and are looking forward to taking care of you!

**Conclusion**

The biggest misconception is that everything in your mouth is OK unless you feel discomfort or pain. Unfortunately, these are only indicators of serious conditions that are often irreversible and no longer salvageable. *Only because you don’t feel discomfort or pain at the moment a restoration is diagnosed, doesn’t mean it doesn’t need immediate attention.*

As we have learned in this ebook, there are many scenarios that complicate a restoration more than it needs to be, and which could lead to tooth loss. Unnecessary situations like infectious pulpitis, hollow teeth, over-exposed dentin (sclerotic dentin), bad breath and complete tooth loss are avoidable if they are addressed once detected.

Don’t let a minor situation escalate to unnecessary treatments. If your dentist detected any abnormality in the condition of your teeth, then it’s imperative you address it as soon as possible to ensure your long-term oral health. As a society there are many people who will say that looks do not matter, but we would beg to differ. A smile, be it bad or good, tends to draw people instead of push them away, especially when they see someone who has taken care of their smile. When choosing someone to take care of your teeth you want them to be someone that you trust. If you are wishing to achieve the perfect smile, then you should choose someone who has that same end goal as you do. You can be assured that we do.
About Debra Gray King, DDS, FAACD:

Dr. King is one of the few dentists in the world to limit her practice to cosmetic dentistry smile designs. She is an Accredited Fellow in the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, which is considered the highest level of competence in cosmetic dentistry. Featured as an expert cosmetic dentist on ABC’s “Extreme Makeover,” Dr. King is a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Memphis Dental School and post-graduate programs at the Pankey Institute, the Pacific Aesthetic Continuum (PAC-Live) at the University of the Pacific in San Francisco, The Hornbrook Group and the Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies.

She has lectured extensively at educational seminars around the world and is a clinical instructor of full-mouth reconstruction with the Aesthetic Masters program.

She has been featured by Entertainment Tonight, The Doctors, CNN, The Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, Fox News, CBS, InStyle, Vogue, Glamour, USA Today and UK's The Guardian. A leading trade publication, Dental Products Report, named Dr. King one of the Top 25 Women in Dentistry. Johnson & Johnson selected Dr. King as a national spokesperson for Listerine.

Dr. King established the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry in 1987 and has since changed the lives of thousands of people by improving their smiles and boosting their confidence. To do so, she uses porcelain veneers, cosmetic bonding, whitening and full-mouth reconstruction, creating positive results no matter how challenging the issue. A pioneer in the art of Instant Orthodontics and Scalpel-less Facelifts, Dr. King also strives to create a comfortable environment for her clients, making them feel more like they’re at the spa than at a typical dentist’s office.