Do You Need a Dental Crown?

Shared by Dr. Michael Perona

A crown may be recommended when a tooth has lost so much of its natural structure that a filling alone can't protect it from breaking. This is the main reason dentists suggest crowns, and it applies most often in a few specific situations.

When a crown is usually recommended

- **After root canal treatment on a back tooth.** This is the situation with the strongest evidence behind it. Back teeth that have had root canal treatment but were not given a crown broke down or were lost about 6 times more often than those that were crowned. Most dentists agree crowns should be placed on back teeth after root canal treatment. For front teeth with root canal treatment, a crown isn't automatically needed — it depends on how much of the natural tooth is left.
- **A cracked tooth.** Crowns are a common and effective way to treat a cracked tooth, especially after root canal treatment, and they tend to help the tooth last longer than other repairs. If a crack is caught early and the tooth still has healthy nerve tissue, placing a crown may be enough — though about 1 in 5 of these teeth still end up needing root canal treatment later. If the nerve is already badly inflamed or has died, root canal treatment is needed before the crown is placed.
- **A broken tooth or a large, failing filling.** A broken tooth is the single most common reason dentists place new crowns, followed by protecting teeth that have large or failing fillings.
- **Significant tooth wear.** When a tooth is very worn down, or when regular fillings keep failing, a crown or similar cap-like repair may be used.
- **Appearance.** Improving how a tooth looks is one of the leading reasons for getting a crown, and it's also the most common reason an old crown gets replaced, along with new decay forming underneath it.

When a smaller repair might work just as well

If you have a back tooth that needs work in the middle and on both sides (sometimes called an "MOD" area), a smaller cap that covers just the chewing surface (called an onlay) may work as well as a full crown. An onlay removes noticeably less of your natural tooth than a full crown does, and research comparing the two shows similar results for this type of

tooth. Since keeping more natural tooth structure helps lower the risk of a future break, a smaller repair is often a reasonable option when enough healthy tooth remains. This is a good topic to discuss with your clinician when deciding what's right for your tooth.

For minor damage, a regular filling (not a crown) usually works well. Crowns become the better choice only once tooth loss is moderate to severe, or when a filling alone wouldn't be strong enough to prevent the tooth from cracking under normal chewing.

Other things that affect the decision

Placing a crown requires enough healthy tooth structure left standing to hold it securely in place. If there isn't enough, additional procedures — such as adjusting the gum level or gently repositioning the tooth — may be needed first, though these carry their own considerations.

Because dentists can reasonably differ in these decisions, it's worth talking with your clinician about how much natural tooth structure you have left and your personal risk of the tooth breaking, so you can decide together on the best repair for your situation.