

Dental Offices Urged to Install Amalgam Separators

The SDDA House of Delegates has adopted a resolution urging dental offices in South Dakota to install amalgam separators. By installing amalgam separators SDDA members ensure the health of the environment in a manner that is both cost effective and simple. Although chairside traps collect large chunks of amalgam when restorations are placed or removed, they only capture about half the amalgam that is generated. With the installation of an amalgam separator, dentists can prevent 99 percent of their amalgam waste from entering the office wastewater.

The House of Delegates adopted the pro-active resolution when it became evident that voluntary compliance by the dental profession is preferable to added regulation by local municipalities. Amalgam waste restrictions are sweeping the Country and all indications are that voluntary compliance gets just as good a result as mandated regulations, and in the long-run voluntary compliance not only bodes well for the image of dentistry, it also saves time and money on the part of both the dental professionals and the regulators.

The SDDA is not recommending which separators to install, but rather recommends that each dental office request information and recommendations from their local dental supplier regarding the type of separator that will work best for each office.

Once amalgam waste is captured it can be processed by a recycling facility to recover mercury safely. Your current waste handling firm should be able to accept the amalgam captured by an amalgam separator. If you need a list of waste handling firms, please contact the SDDA.

In addition to installing an amalgam separator, all dentists are encouraged to follow the Best Management Practices for Amalgam Waste. A brochure with the American Dental Association's recommended Best Management Practices is enclosed with this newsletter.

What is an Amalgam Separator?

This summary provided by the Minnesota Dental Association

To capture amalgam particles, amalgam separators use one or more technologies: sedimentation, filtration, centrifugation and ion exchange. All four technologies work well. However, not all amalgam separators are equally as effective. Consult with your dental supply company to determine which separator will work best in your office.

Sedimentation technology is used in the majority of amalgam separators, sometimes along with filtration and ion exchange. Sedimentation technology relies on a settling tank in which heavy metal particles such as amalgam can settle out of the wastewater. Some separators that use sedimentation require more space than units that use other types of technology, so if space is limited, be sure to check the dimensions of the separator you're considering to make sure it will fit.

Each amalgam separator requires ongoing maintenance to remove the collected amalgam. Some units require daily decanting, while others require replacement of a filter or containment unit every 1 to 18 months, depending upon the size of collection tanks and volumes generated within the dental office. Review the chart of approved separators to determine the type and recommended frequency of maintenance required for each unit.

Most amalgam separators are compatible with both wet and dry vacuum systems, in both large and small dental offices. However, for offices with a dry vacuum system in place, check with your dental supply company to determine if an amalgam separator that relies on filtration technology is compatible with your system. The separator chart identifies the most common installation location for each amalgam separator in relation to the chair and the vacuum pump. Each dental office should confirm this information with the manufacturer or the dental supply company that is familiar with the office's vacuum system.