

<b>Meta Title</b>	<i>What's the Difference Between a Cavity and a Stain?   West Coast Dental</i>
<b>Meta Description</b>	How are cavities and stains alike? How are they different? Let's take a look at what each of them are - their causes, symptoms, and treatments for each. We'll clear up the cavity vs stain confusion once and for all.
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## What's the Difference Between a Cavity and a Stain?

by Sarah Carpenter

Cavities and tooth stains have a few things in common — for example, they both occur in your mouth, affect your teeth and can be treated by a dentist. However, when we look deeper, there are quite a few differences between them. So, let's define each of them and identify their key characteristics. Next, we'll explore their causes, symptoms, visuals (what they look like) and treatments.

### What Is a Cavity?

[A cavity is tooth decay](#) that develops below the tooth's surface where you can't see it. Over time, tooth enamel begins to break down beneath the surface while the surface remains intact. When enough of the subsurface enamel is eaten away, the surface collapses and forms a cavity.

### Causes of a Cavity

Our mouths contain billions of bacteria that live on our teeth and tongue. Most of these bacteria are usually harmless. However, when you eat foods containing sugar, some bacteria feed on it, producing acid. This acid dissolves the minerals of your tooth enamel. Usually, your saliva can restore these minerals, but if you continuously eat sugary foods, your saliva cannot keep up. As a result, cavities are formed when acid passes from your tooth's first layer (the enamel) into the second layer (dentin) and then into the pulp.

### Symptoms of a Cavity

[The symptoms of cavities vary](#) depending on their extent and location. When a cavity is just beginning, you may not have any symptoms at all. As the decay gets larger, it may cause signs and symptoms such as:

- Toothache, spontaneous pain or pain that occurs without any apparent cause.
- Tooth sensitivity.
- Mild to sharp pain when eating or drinking something sweet, hot or cold.
- Visible holes or pits in your teeth.
- Brown, black or white staining on any surface of a tooth.
- Pain when you bite down.

### What Does a Cavity Look Like?

A cavity [might be a white spot on your tooth](#), or it could be a dark or discolored spot. Either way, it won't match the rest of your tooth, and it's a sign that something is amiss. A cavity might also be a tiny hole or a larger hole or crack that you can feel with your tongue. A cavity might also be present if your gums look raw, red or swollen (especially close to the tooth line) or if your gums are bleeding.

### **Treatment for a Cavity**

Regular dental checkups can identify cavities before they cause troubling symptoms and lead to more-serious problems. The sooner you seek care, the better your chances of reversing the earliest stages of tooth decay and preventing its progression.

Treatment options include:

- Fluoride treatments.
- Fillings.
- Crowns.
- Root canals.
- Tooth extractions.

### **What is a Tooth Stain?**

A tooth stain is discoloration that occurs on the surface of your teeth or below the enamel. Some people develop both types of stains, and they can be a result of your [food and drink choices](#), oral hygiene, and use of medication. Tooth discoloration can occur as a result of surface stains due to actual changes in your tooth material or a combination of both.

### **Causes of Stained Teeth**

Teeth stains have many causes. Some causes could have possibly been prevented, and many are beyond your control. Certain foods and drinks can cause teeth stains. Tooth discoloration can also be a product of several biological factors including the transparency of your tooth enamel. Tobacco use and poor oral care can cause stains, as can trauma, illness or disease. Sometimes, medical treatments such as chemotherapy can contribute to stains as well as high blood pressure medications, antihistamines and some antipsychotic medications.

### **Symptoms of a Stain and What It Looks Like**

If the color of your teeth are changing, you have discoloration. [You might notice they don't look](#) as bright or as white as they should. Your teeth may darken, turning from white to different colors or develop white or dark spots in places. It's even possible for your teeth to completely change color from white to yellow to brown to black.

### **Treatment for a Stain**

There are several treatment options available for teeth that have been affected by discoloration. They can vary depending on the cause of the stains but will typically include:

- Brushing and flossing your teeth twice-a-day.
- Avoiding foods and beverages that cause stains.
- Using over-the-counter whitening agents.
- In-home whitening agents purchased from your dentist.
- Whitening procedures that take place in your dentist's office.

- Bonding and veneers — a dentist applies material to your teeth to change their color or shape.

## Cavity vs. Stain

[Some people might confuse a cavity with a stain](#) and vice versa. A cavity is a permanently damaged area on the surface of your tooth which may feel sticky. It's tooth decay that can become bigger and deeper in time and may create a hole in your tooth. Stains may resemble cavities but seem to shrink or grow rather than steadily get bigger. They may even disappear after brushing your teeth or changing your diet. Sometimes, the difference between the two isn't so clear cut. So, it's important to visit your dentist.

## West Coast Dental Can Help

Whether you have a cavity or a stain, it's important to keep your teeth healthy and looking great by maintaining a consistent oral health routine including twice-daily toothbrushing and daily flossing with twice-yearly visits to your dentist. Find the right practitioner for you at West Coast Dental. Our specialists and general dentists are ready to serve you and your dental needs. [Schedule an appointment](#) with us today.

*Sarah Carpenter is a freelance writer whose portfolio spans the industries of healthcare, higher education and entertainment. Find out more at [her website](#).*

## References

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Healthline — [What Does Tooth Decay Look Like?](#)

Crest — [Teeth Stains: Causes, Types, and How to Remove Teeth Stains](#)

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Healthline — [How Do I Tell the Difference Between a Cavity or Stain?](#)