You may have heard about dental amalgams (commonly known as silver fillings) in the news. Used to treat tooth decay, dental amalgam is a mixture of metals, composed of mercury and a powdered amalgam alloy, composed primarily of silver, tin and copper. A Federal Advisory panel recently re-examined the scientific data used to determine the safety of amalgam fillings. Below are the latest updates.

From the FDA (The U.S. Food and Drug Administration): The FDA recently held an advisory panel to discuss several scientific issues that may affect the regulation of dental amalgam, used for direct filling of carious lesions or structural defects in teeth. The panel focused particularly on the potential risk to vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women, fetuses, and young children.

The concerns raised include the adequacy of the risk assessment method used by the FDA in classifying dental amalgam, the bioaccumulative effect of mercury, the exposure of pediatric populations to mercury vapor, and the adequacy of the clinical studies on dental amalgam. In addition, a recent report on risk assessments issued by the National Academy of Sciences, titled “Science and Decisions: Advancing Risk Assessment, NAP 2009,” proposed new approaches to conducting risk assessments. These were some of the issues the agency asked the advisory committee to review.

From the ADA (American Dental Association): An FDA Advisory Panel heard testimony in December 2010 on the science behind the agency’s rule issued last year classifying amalgam as a Class II device, a move that was fully supported by the ADA. The American Dental Association praised the Food and Drug Administration advisory panel’s finding that the FDA acted appropriately when it ruled in 2009 that dental amalgam is a safe and effective treatment option for the general population.

“The panel recommended continuing review of existing and new scientific information as it becomes available,” said ADA President Raymond F. Gist, DDS. “As a science-based organization representing a science-based profession, we support this. As with all clinical issues, our position on amalgam is based on the best available science. We will continue to maintain or revise our positions on oral health and oral health care issues accordingly. At the end of the day, all treatment decisions should be made by patients with the advice of their dentists. We support the rights of all patients to decide how best to maintain and improve their oral health.”

The ADA position has remained consistent with the science on the subject, and is in line with numerous governmental and private scientific organizations around the world. Dental amalgam is safe and should remain a viable option for patients and their dentists to consider for treating dental decay. Delta Dental of Nebraska members are encouraged to visit www.ada.org, which contains credible and helpful information for the public about dental filling choices.