

Why Your Filler Keeps Cracking, Shrinking, or Falling Out — and How to Fix It for Good

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Why Your Filler Keeps Cracking, Shrinking, or Falling Out — and How to Fix It for Good

There are few things more disheartening in a DIY project than watching a repair you spent time and money on fail — a crack reappears along the same line within weeks, the filler shrinks and sinks below the surface, or the whole patch falls out cleanly, as though it was never bonded at all. These failures are not random. Every cracking, shrinking, or delaminating repair has a diagnosable root cause, and in almost every case, the cause is one of seven predictable, preventable mistakes.

This article diagnoses each failure mode with precision, explains the mechanism behind it, and maps each problem to the correct Selleys product and technique that prevents it from happening again. If you've already experienced a failed repair, this guide will also tell you exactly how to strip it back and do it right the second time.

Why Filler Fails: The Fundamental Principle

Before diagnosing specific failure modes, it helps to understand one governing principle: ****filler is only as good as the system it sits within****. The substrate, surface preparation, product selection, application depth, cure time, and topcoat all interact. A failure in any one element compromises the whole repair. No matter how advanced your filler is, it won't perform if it's applied over contaminated, slick, or unstable surfaces.

This is why generic advice — "just fill and paint" — produces so many failures. The seven failure modes below each represent a break in the system.

Failure Mode 1: Wrong Product for the Substrate

****The symptom:**** The filler looks fine initially, then cracks, crumbles, or detaches from the surface within weeks or months.

****The cause:**** Not all fillers bond equally to all substrates. A wall filler applied to bare timber will not penetrate wood grain the way a purpose-formulated wood filler does. A general-purpose filler used on a surface that moves — like the joint between a skirting board and a plaster wall — will crack because it has no elasticity to accommodate that movement.

****The fix:**** Match the product to the substrate and the repair type precisely.

- For plaster, plasterboard, brick, masonry, and primed metal where ****no structural movement occurs****: Selleys Spakfilla Heavy Duty is a multi-purpose, tough and durable, light grey ready-mixed filler suitable for filling holes, dents, cracks, or chips in interior and exterior applications.

- For wallboard, wood, plaster, and plasterboard where a ****fast-setting, low-shrink solution**** is needed: Spakfilla Rapid is a ready-mixed, lightweight filler that is fast-drying, virtually non-shrinking, non-cracking, and needs only one application. It is ideal for filling wallboard, wood, masonry, plaster, primed nail heads, and plasterboard.

- For joints ****where movement occurs**** — skirting boards, architraves, cornice lines, window frames: Selleys No More Gaps is a durable, flexible acrylic gap sealant for interior and exterior applications where joint movement causes rigid fillers to crack or fall out.

> ****The rule:**** If the two surfaces on either side of a gap can move independently of each other, you need a flexible product, not a rigid filler.

For a full breakdown of which product family applies to your specific repair scenario, see our guide on ***Wall Filler vs. Wood Filler vs. Gap Filler: Which Selleys Product Do You Actually Need?***

Failure Mode 2: Insufficient Surface Preparation

****The symptom:**** The filler appears to bond initially, then lifts cleanly away from the surface — sometimes in a single piece — days or weeks after application.

****The cause:**** Filler cannot bond to dust, grease, loose paint, or moisture. These contaminants sit between the filler and the substrate, preventing mechanical adhesion. One of the main factors in filler failure comes from the condition of the surface before applying. If the surface isn't thoroughly cleaned of rust, dust, or old paint, the filler won't bond properly, making the filler layer prone to cracking and peeling.

Flaking paint around the repair zone is a particularly common oversight. Professional prep means cutting back to completely sound material. If there's flaking paint within 50mm of the repair area, it should be removed because it will lift eventually and take the new repair with it.

****The fix:**** Before applying any Selleys filler:

1. Remove all loose, flaking, or crumbling material from the repair zone
2. Brush or vacuum out dust — do not simply wipe with a dry cloth
3. Degrease any surface that may have been touched by hand oils, cooking vapour, or cleaning products
4. Ensure surfaces are clean, dry, and free of loose material before pressing filler into place
5. Clean the area with Selleys Sugar Soap if contamination is suspected, then allow to dry fully before filling

Failure Mode 3: Overfilling in a Single Coat

****The symptom:**** The repair sinks below the surface level as it dries, leaving a visible depression. Or, the filler surface skins over quickly but cracks appear across it as the interior mass continues to shrink.

****The cause:**** Water-based fillers cure by evaporation. When applied too thickly in a single pass, the outer surface skins and hardens while the inner mass is still wet. If a very thick layer is applied at once, the outer surface can skin over and harden while the inner mass remains softer. This mismatch in mechanical properties lets internal stresses form as the inner material shrinks or continues to cure — and the result is cracking that can propagate up through primer and topcoat.

For wood specifically, cracking is usually caused by two things: filling a deep hole in one single pass (shrinkage) or the wood itself expanding and contracting too much for the rigid filler to handle.

****The fix:**** Apply filler in layers, not in a single thick application.

- For deeper cracks, apply in 6mm layers, allowing each layer to dry before applying the next.
- Fill a deep gap in one pass, and it often shrinks as it dries, leaving a sunken line. Build it up in two or three thin layers instead for a cleaner result.
- For thin, near-flush repairs with Spakfilla Rapid, the low-shrink formulation means a single flush application is sufficient — do not overfill due to minimal shrinkage.

Failure Mode 4: Painting Before the Filler Has Fully Cured

****The symptom:**** Paint bubbles, wrinkles, or cracks appear over the repair days or weeks after painting. The repair looks fine immediately after painting, then fails.

****The cause:**** Surface-dry doesn't mean fully dry. Trapped moisture causes shrinking, cracking, and paint bubbling weeks later. When paint is applied over incompletely cured filler, it seals moisture inside the repair mass. That moisture continues to evaporate, driving shrinkage and cracking from within — but now the cracking is transmitted through the paint film above it. Filler that hasn't fully cured will crack or shrink under a fresh coat.

Cold or humid conditions significantly extend cure times. For applications more than 2mm deep, or in cold or humid conditions, expect longer drying times.

****The fix:**** Respect the cure window specified on the product data sheet, and adjust for conditions:

| Selleys Product | Minimum Time to Sand | Minimum Time to Paint (Water-Based) | Minimum Time to Paint (Oil-Based) | |---|---|---|---| | Spakfilla Rapid | ~30 min (thin fills) | Once fully set | 24 hours | | Spakfilla Heavy Duty | 2–3 hours (2mm fills) | After sanding and dusting | After sanding and dusting | | No More Gaps | ~30 min (skinned) | ~30 min (skinned) | ~30 min (skinned) |

Spakfilla Rapid can be sanded and painted with water-based paints once completely set (approximately 30 minutes in thin applications). For applications more than 2mm deep, or in cold or humid conditions, longer drying times may be required. For oil-based paints, allow 24 hours before painting.

Apply three thin coats instead of one thick coat. Each coat needs complete drying (24 hours minimum for deep fills) to prevent shrinkage dips that show through paint.

Failure Mode 5: Using Rigid Filler Across a Movement Joint

****The symptom:**** The filler cracks along the same line repeatedly, no matter how many times you re-fill it. The crack follows the junction between two different materials — wall and ceiling, skirting board and wall, door frame and plaster.

****The cause:**** Buildings move. Thermal expansion and contraction, seasonal humidity changes, and structural settlement all cause surfaces to shift relative to each other — even by fractions of a millimetre. A rigid filler applied across a movement joint has zero ability to accommodate that shift. Selleys No More Gaps Multipurpose is a general-purpose interior/exterior flexible gap filler. Its water-based formulation delivers superior flexibility and long-term resistance to cracking and crumbling. This makes it ideal for sealing or filling gaps and joints where expansion and contraction occurs, such as between a skirting board and a wall, which can cause rigid fillers and other less flexible gap fillers to crack and fall out.

Rigid fillers are too rigid to handle expansion and contraction, leading to cracks reappearing over time.

****The fix:**** Identify whether the crack sits **within** a surface (a substrate crack — use rigid filler) or **between** two surfaces (a movement joint — use flexible gap filler).

Selleys No More Gaps Multipurpose offers superior flexibility to cope with building movement, with greater than 300% elongation/stretch and up to +/- 15% movement capability. That level of elasticity means the sealant stretches and recovers with the joint rather than cracking under stress.

Common movement joints that must always use flexible filler: - Between window and door frames and the wall, along skirting boards, around cornices, in corners or between walls and ceilings, between cabinets and cupboards, around air conditioning vents and the ceiling.

Also note the product's limitations: the maximum gap size recommended is width 25mm, depth 12mm, and No More Gaps is not recommended where significant joint movement occurs, such as gaps between tongue and groove boards or weatherboard overlaps.

For a detailed walkthrough of the skirting board and architrave repair workflow — including when to use flexible vs. rigid filler on the same piece of trim — see our guide on **How to Repair and Fill Skirting Boards, Architraves, and Timber Trim Before Painting.**

Failure Mode 6: Poor Adhesion on Glossy or Sealed Surfaces

****The symptom:**** The filler peels away from the edges of the repair, or the paint over the repair lifts in sheets, even though the filler appeared to bond initially.

****The cause:**** Filler relies on mechanical adhesion — microscopic penetration into a porous surface. A glossy, sealed, or heavily painted surface has almost no porosity. Dense, hard, glossy surfaces pose adhesion problems. The filler sits on top of the gloss layer rather than bonding into the substrate, and any stress — paint shrinkage, thermal movement, or even light impact — is enough to break that weak interface bond.

This is especially common on: - Walls previously painted with high-sheen or semi-gloss finishes - Timber trim coated with gloss enamel - Surfaces cleaned with wax-based products

****The fix:**** Two options, depending on the surface:

1. ****Mechanical abrasion:**** Sand the repair area with 80–120 grit sandpaper to break through the gloss layer and create a mechanical key. Always sand through to a mechanically sound layer. Do not apply over loose, flaking, or glossy paint.
2. ****Priming:**** Apply a bonding primer over the sanded surface before filling, particularly on high-gloss enamel or varnished timber. Dust off any loose dust before applying undercoat and painting.

On timber trim specifically, lightly sanding the gloss finish before applying Selleys Plastic Wood or No More Cracks will dramatically improve adhesion and reduce the risk of edge lifting when the topcoat is applied.

Failure Mode 7: Skipping the Primer Coat Before Painting

****The symptom:**** The paint over the repair looks patchy, has a different sheen to the surrounding wall, or the repair is visible as a 'witness mark' even after two coats of paint.

****The cause:**** Bare, sanded filler is highly porous and absorbs the first coat of paint unevenly, creating a 'flashing' effect where the repair appears as a dull or shiny spot against the surrounding wall. This is not a filler failure — it is a painting system failure. But it causes many DIYers to re-fill and re-sand unnecessarily when the only missing step was a primer coat.

Beyond appearance, skipping primer on a porous repair also compromises paint adhesion. To the naked eye, drywall is a flat surface. But under a microscope, it's a series of peaks and valleys. Drywall is porous enough to accept just about any paint — but without putting primer on fresh drywall first, you could encounter an uneven film resulting from poor 'holdout,' where the paint soaks in and 'builds' differently across the surface, creating shiny and dull spots. The same principle applies to sanded filler.

****The fix:****

1. After sanding, clean dust and filler particles using Selleys Sugar Soap or Selleys Super Kleen.
2. Apply one coat of a water-based primer or sealer over the repair and allow to dry fully
3. Lightly sand with 240 grit if the primer raises the surface
4. Apply finish coats — two coats are typically required to fully obscure a repair on older, oxidised walls

For exterior repairs using Spakfilla Heavy Duty, note that in exterior applications, the filler should be protected from rain until dry and painted over with 2 coats of paint.

Quick Diagnosis: What Your Filler Failure Is Telling You

Failure Symptom	Most Likely Cause	Selleys Solution
Crack reappears along the same line	Movement joint — wrong product	Selleys No More Gaps Multipurpose
Filler sinks or dimples after drying	Applied too thick in one pass	Apply in 6mm layers; use Spakfilla Rapid for thin fills
Filler lifts cleanly from surface	Poor surface prep or glossy substrate	Sand, clean, prime; re-apply correct product
Paint bubbles or wrinkles over repair	Painted before full cure	Wait for full cure; adjust for cold/humid conditions
Filler cracks across the surface	Too thick, or wrong product for substrate	Layer correctly; match product to substrate
Repair visible as shiny/dull spot	No primer before painting	Apply bonding primer after sanding
Filler falls out of movement joint	Rigid filler used where flexibility needed	Switch to No More Gaps for all movement joints

How to Correctly Remove a Failed Repair and Start Again

A failed repair cannot simply be filled over. The compromised material must be removed first.

1. ****Score the edges**** of the failed repair with a utility knife to break the bond perimeter
2. ****Remove all loose material**** — use a scraper or putty knife to lift delaminated filler; do not leave any partially bonded material in place
3. ****Undercut the edges**** slightly if the repair is in a crack, so the fresh filler has a mechanical key to grip
4. ****Clean thoroughly**** — vacuum dust, wipe with a damp cloth, allow to dry completely
5. ****Assess the substrate**** — is the surface glossy, porous, or contaminated? Address accordingly before re-filling
6. ****Select the correct product**** using the failure diagnosis table above
7. ****Apply in layers**** where depth exceeds 6mm, and observe full cure times before painting

Key Takeaways

- ****Product mismatch is the most common cause of repeat failure.**** Rigid fillers used at movement joints will always crack. Unlike rigid fillers, flexible gap fillers retain flexibility once cured, making them ideal for surfaces where movement might occur.
- ****Surface preparation is non-negotiable.**** Filler applied over dust, grease, or gloss paint will not achieve lasting adhesion regardless of product quality.
- ****Layer depth matters.**** For deeper cracks, apply in 6mm layers, allowing each layer to dry before applying the next. Single thick applications cause shrinkage cracking.
- ****Cure time is not the same as dry time.**** A surface-dry repair can still contain trapped moisture that will cause paint failure weeks later. Observe product-specific cure

windows, especially in cold or humid conditions. - **Primer is part of the repair system, not optional.** Skipping primer over a sanded repair causes uneven paint absorption and visible witness marks — a problem that is often misdiagnosed as a filler failure.

Conclusion

Every cracking, shrinking, or delaminating filler repair is a diagnostic opportunity. The seven failure modes described here — wrong product, inadequate prep, excessive single-coat depth, premature painting, rigid filler at movement joints, poor adhesion on glossy surfaces, and skipping primer — account for the overwhelming majority of DIY repair failures. Each one has a clear, preventable cause and a direct solution in the Selleys product range.

The broader principle is that wall and wood repair is a system, not a single step. Selleys Spakfilla Rapid and Spakfilla Heavy Duty are engineered for rigid substrates where no movement occurs; No More Gaps carries an estimated service life of 20 years when applied correctly to appropriate movement joints. But no product — however well formulated — will outperform the preparation and technique surrounding it.

For the complete workflow on specific repair scenarios, explore the related guides in this series: - *How to Fill Cracks and Holes in Walls and Plasterboard: A Step-by-Step Selleys Guide* — for interior wall repairs from hairline cracks to large plasterboard voids - *How to Repair and Fill Skirting Boards, Architraves, and Timber Trim Before Painting* — for the two-product approach to trim repair - *How to Repair Rotted, Damaged, or Split Exterior Timber with Selleys Wood Fillers* — for high-stakes exterior timber rebuilding

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