



Protection from tooth decay

Dental sealants

Do you know what tooth decay is? When most people talk about tooth decay, they think of a cavity (a hole in your tooth). That is sort of right, but tooth decay actually starts before you get to that point.

Everyone has a coating of bacteria, called plaque, that forms on their teeth. When you eat or drink, those bacteria can turn foods and many sugary beverages into acid. This acid breaks down the hard coating of your teeth called enamel. This is tooth decay. If not caught early, it can develop into a painful cavity.

Why not stop tooth decay in the early stages, or better yet, prevent it in the first place? Dental sealants may help.¹

WHAT ARE DENTAL SEALANTS?

Dental sealants are a protective coating that your dentist can place over the chewing surfaces of your back teeth. These areas are at high risk of developing tooth decay. They are not smooth—they have deep pits and grooves. Your toothbrush cannot get into these areas to keep them clean, so food and plaque can be trapped and easily cause tooth decay.

Your dentist can apply sealants to the chewing surfaces of these teeth to form a barrier over the rough surface. Sealants go on as a gel-like liquid and then harden into a thin but strong protective coating. Often, your dentist will shine a light on the sealants to help them harden.

Dental sealants usually last for years, but they can become worn.² Your dentist can check them during your dental visits to see if they need to be repaired or replaced.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM SEALANTS?

We know that children benefit from sealants. Children who have sealants are much less likely to develop tooth decay than children who do not have sealants.³ But what about adults? A review of the research related to sealants could not find any studies of the effect of sealants on tooth decay in adults. However, a panel of dental experts suggest that sealants may help reduce the risk of tooth decay in this group, too.³

Sealants may save you money in the long run by helping to prevent tooth decay,⁴ but there may be costs associated with applying them. Talk to your dentist and check with your insurance carrier to see if sealants are covered under your plan.

DO I STILL NEED TO BRUSH MY TEETH?

Sealants do not take the place of toothbrushing. They help protect the chewing surfaces of your back teeth, but you still

need to brush and clean between your teeth to reduce the risk of tooth decay.

- To take care of your teeth, you should
- brush twice a day with a toothpaste that contains fluoride;
 - clean between your teeth once per day with floss or another interdental cleaner;
 - eat a healthy diet that limits sugary drinks and snacks;
 - see your dentist regularly.

CONCLUSION

Daily oral care is key to keeping your mouth healthy, but sealants may be able to offer you extra protection against tooth decay. Talk to your dentist about whether sealants are a good option for you. ■

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“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

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