

Dental Sealants



Protecting Teeth,
Preventing Decay



Introduction

Our teeth are constantly being covered with a sticky film of bacteria, called plaque. When we eat or drink anything that contains sugar — such as cookies, candy, soda, juice, fruit and many other foods and beverages — bacteria turn the sugar into acids that can attack tooth enamel. For some people, repeated attacks may eventually result in decay. The good news is that there is a way to protect your teeth and prevent decay.

Dental Sealants

One of the most common places that tooth decay develops is on the chewing surfaces of the back teeth, the premolars and molars. When you run your tongue along the chewing surfaces of the back teeth, you can feel depressions and grooves. These indentations, called pits and fissures, help to grind food.

Regular brushing and cleaning between teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner help remove food particles and bacteria from the smooth surfaces of tooth enamel. However, it's difficult to keep the pits and fissures clean. That's because toothbrush bristles can't reach into the grooves of your back teeth to remove plaque, bacteria and tiny particles of food.



What's the solution?

Because the grooves on the back of your teeth are hard to keep clean, your dentist may recommend dental sealants. A dental sealant is a plastic material that is applied to a chewing surface of a back tooth. The sealant acts as a barrier, protecting enamel by "sealing out" plaque and food.

How are sealants applied?

Sealants are easy to apply, and it takes only a few minutes to seal each tooth. First, the teeth that will be sealed are cleaned and prepared to accept the sealant. The sealant is then "painted" onto the tooth enamel, where it bonds directly to the tooth and hardens. Sometimes a special curing light is used to harden the sealant. Sealants are generally clear or white and cannot be seen when you smile or talk.



BEFORE
Chewing surface of a molar before sealant is applied.



AFTER
Chewing surface of a molar protected by a sealant.

Ask your dentist whether sealants can put extra power behind your prevention program.

How long do sealants last?

As long as the sealant remains intact, the tooth's chewing surfaces will be protected from plaque and food. Sealants, which hold up well under the force of everyday chewing, can last a few years before a reapplication is needed. However, it is important to see the dentist regularly to check that the sealant remains intact.

The likelihood of developing tooth decay on the chewing surfaces begins shortly after teeth come into the mouth, so children and teenagers are obvious candidates for sealants. Adults can benefit from sealants, too, because you never "outgrow" the risk for developing cavities.

Keeping your smile healthy

Dental sealants can help prevent decay. They can also help you save time and money that would have been spent on restorative dental procedures. In order to keep your smile healthy, brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste that carries the ADA Seal of Acceptance — an important symbol of a dental product's safety and effectiveness. You should clean between your teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner once a day, visit your dentist regularly and avoid frequent between-meal snacks.



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Sealant before-and-after photos courtesy of
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