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# Sealants

## **What are Dental Sealants?**

Dental sealants are thin plastic coatings which are applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth to prevent decay. Most tooth decay in children and adolescents occurs on the chewing surfaces of these back teeth, which are called molars. This is because molars have irregular surfaces with pits and grooves which tend to trap food and bacteria debris. Sealants flow into and coat these pits and grooves so that bacteria cannot multiply and cause decay.

## **Why is Sealing a Tooth Better Than Filling a Cavity?**

Sealants help maintain sound teeth. Decay destroys the structure of the tooth. Each time a tooth is filled or a filling is replaced, additional tooth structure is lost. Amalgam fillings last an average of six to eight years before they need to be replaced. Appropriate use of sealants can save time, money, and the discomfort associated with restorative dental procedures.

## **How are Sealants Applied?**

Applying sealants is quite simple and may be done by a dentist or a dental hygienist. First, the teeth are cleaned. Then the teeth to be sealed are dabbed with a very mild acid solution similar in strength to vinegar or lemon juice. This roughens the tooth surface very slightly so that the sealant will bond to it properly. After the tooth is prepared, the sealant is painted onto the tooth. It flows into the pits and grooves and hardens in about 60 seconds. After sealing, bacteria cannot reach the pits and grooves, and therefore cannot cause decay. Applying sealants requires **no drilling** or removal of the tooth surface. Tooth structure is left intact - healthy teeth are protected from decay forming bacteria.

## **How Long Will Dental Sealants Last?**

A sealant application can last five years and often times even longer. Sealants should be checked regularly and reapplied when they appear to have worn off. Because teeth are most susceptible to decay when they are young, preventing decay during the first 5 to 14 years after a tooth erupts is critical.

## **How do Sealants Fit into a Preventive Dentistry Program?**

For maximum benefit, sealants should be used as part of a child's total preventive dental care. A dentist should examine the child's teeth and gums regularly to check bite, tooth eruption, and the condition of both hard and soft tissues. A complete preventive dentistry program also includes: brushing and flossing, use of fluorides, good nutrition, and regular dental check-ups.

## **Do Sealants Cost More Than Fillings?**

The cost of sealing a tooth is consistently less than the cost of having a tooth filled.

## **Will Sealants Replace Fluoride?**

*No!* Fluorides such as those used in fluoridated water, fluoride toothpaste, and fluoride mouth rinse help prevent decay on the smooth surfaces of teeth; however, fluorides have less effect on the rough, pitted chewing surfaces of the back teeth where food particles and decay producing bacteria are trapped. Sealants are effective on the uneven chewing surfaces.

## **Have Sealants Been Thoroughly Tested?**

Yes! Thousands of children across the United States and in other countries have had their teeth sealed in controlled clinical studies. These studies have shown sealants to be effective, easy-to-apply, inexpensive and non-toxic. **That's why the American Dental Association, the National Institute of Dental Research, and the American Public Health Association have recommended sealants.**