

Tooth decay often occurs on the chewing surfaces of back teeth. The good news is that sealants can offer major protection against cavities.

What causes tooth decay?

Your teeth are covered with a sticky film of bacteria, called plaque. Plaque bacteria use sugar and starch in food as a source of energy. The bacteria convert the sugar or starch into harmful acids that attack tooth enamel for as long as 20 minutes or more. Repeated attacks may cause the enamel to break down, resulting in cavities.



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Seal out Decay



What is a sealant?

A sealant is a plastic material that is usually applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth—premolars and molars. This plastic resin bonds into the depressions and grooves (pits and fissures) of the chewing surfaces of back teeth. The sealant acts as a barrier, protecting enamel from plaque and acids.

Why are sealants necessary?

When the back teeth are developing, pits and fissures form in the chewing surfaces of the enamel. They are impossible to keep clean, because the bristles of a toothbrush cannot reach into them. Pits and fissures are snug places for plaque and bits of food to hide! In fact, most cavities form in pit and fissure areas, and back teeth are extremely susceptible to this form of decay. By forming a thin covering over the pits and fissures, sealants keep out plaque and food, thus decreasing the risk of decay.

How are sealants applied?

It usually takes only a few minutes to seal each tooth. The teeth that will be sealed are cleaned. Then the chewing surfaces are conditioned to help the sealant adhere to the tooth. 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 help the sealant harden.

How long do sealants last?

As long as the sealant remains intact, the tooth surface will be protected from decay. Sealants hold up well under the force of normal chewing

and usually last several years before a reapplication is needed. During your regular dental visits, your dentist will check the condition of the sealants and reapply them when necessary.

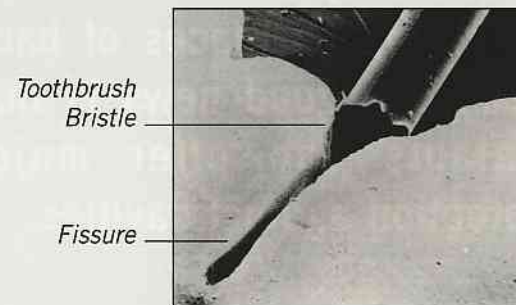
How do sealants fit in with other ways of preventing tooth decay?

Key ingredients in preventing tooth decay and maintaining a healthy mouth are twice-daily brushing with a fluoride toothpaste and cleaning between the teeth daily with floss or interdental cleaners. When shopping for toothbrushes, toothpaste and other oral care products, choose those that bear the ADA Seal of Acceptance—a sign that a dental product has met ADA standards for safety and effectiveness. It's also important to eat a balanced diet and limit snacks. Visit your dentist regularly, and ask your dentist how to get the fluoride you need.

Prevention is better than treatment. Since they are extremely effective in preventing pit and fissure decay, properly applied and maintained sealants can result in savings in both dollars and discomfort.

Are sealants just for kids?

The likelihood of developing pit and fissure decay begins as soon as the back teeth erupt, so children and teenagers are obvious candidates. But adults can also be at risk for this type of decay and can benefit from sealants as well. Ask your dentist about whether sealants can put extra power behind your prevention program.



Even a single toothbrush bristle is too large to reach inside the fissure.



Chewing surface of a molar before sealant is applied.



Chewing surface of a molar protected by a shaded sealant.