

Look Ma, No Cavities!

by Scott F. Kenward, DMD

Only a generation ago, the dental profession focused most of its attention on the restoration and replacement of broken, decayed or missing teeth. While this is still an important aspect of dental practice, much more time and effort is now spent on the prevention of these maladies. One of modern dentistry's strongest weapons in the fight against tooth decay is occlusal sealants.

What Are Sealants?

Sealants are a safe and painless way of protecting your children's teeth from dental decay. A sealant is a protective plastic coating, which is applied to the biting surfaces of the back teeth. The sealant forms a hard shield that keeps food and bacteria from getting into the tiny grooves of the teeth and causing decay.

Sealants are usually applied to the back teeth - the molars and premolars - as these are the teeth that have the pits and fissures on their biting surfaces. Your dentist will advise you which teeth should be sealed after they have been examined. Some teeth naturally form with deep grooves, which will need to be sealed, others with shallow ones, which will not need sealing.

What Is Involved?

The process is usually quick and straightforward, taking only a few minutes per tooth. The tooth is thoroughly cleaned, prepared with a special solution, and dried. The liquid sealant is then applied and allowed to set hard by shining an activating light onto it. The procedure is totally pain free, and the teeth do not feel any different afterwards.

When Should This Be Done?

Sealants are often applied as soon as the permanent teeth start to come through. This is usually between 6 and 7 years of age. The rest are usually sealed as soon as they appear which can be any time between 11 and 21 years of age. Sealants last for many years, but your dentist will want to check them regularly to make sure that the seal is still intact. They can wear over time, and sometimes it is necessary to add or replace some sealant to be sure that no decay can start underneath them.

How Much Does It Cost?

At less than one-fourth the cost of a single small filling, sealants are an excellent value in preventive care. Combined with good oral hygiene, dental fluorides and regular professional cleanings, sealants can help to insure that no-cavity check-up.

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