

SEALED

With A Film

Tooth decay is caused by a sticky film of bacteria—more commonly known as plaque—that covers the teeth after we eat or drink anything that contains sugar or starch. But there's another type of film, called dental sealants, that actually helps prevent the tooth decay that leads to cavities.

Sealants are a very thin plastic film that a dental health professional places directly on the chewing surfaces of your back teeth, the molars and premolars (the teeth directly in front of the molars), which are especially susceptible to tooth decay. They are applied in a liquid form and either self-harden or harden to the teeth with the use of a special light. Sealants, which have been used safely and effectively for more than 20 years, act as a barrier, protecting your tooth's enamel from the plaque and acids that cause tooth decay.

One of the most common places that tooth decay develops is on the chewing surfaces of the molars and premolars. Look at the tops of your back teeth in the mirror or feel them with your tongue. You'll notice that each tooth has grooves or indentations. These are called pits and fissures, and they help your teeth grind food.

However, these indentations are ideal places for food to become trapped, which can result in decay. This is because it is difficult for toothbrush bristles to reach the deepest parts of these pits and fissures. In fact, no matter how well you may brush, sometimes toothbrush bristles are simply too wide to clean the tooth completely. Trapped food and debris develop into plaque, and this can lead to cavities. Also, the deeper into the pits and fissures you go, the thinner the protective outer layer of the tooth, called enamel, becomes.



This is one more reason why pits and fissures should be protected by sealants. What's more, according to the Academy of General Dentistry, research has shown that almost everybody has a 95 percent chance of eventually experiencing cavities in the pits and fissures.

Now, feel your front teeth with your tongue. Do you notice how they are much smoother than your back teeth? Because your front teeth do not have any pits and fissures, they do not need sealants.

Children routinely receive sealants for several reasons: They are still learning how to brush their teeth correctly and are more prone to pit and fissure cavities. It's also beneficial for children to have sealants after their permanent teeth come in. It should be noted, however, that sealants do not replace fluoride; these two separate protections work together to help keep your teeth healthy.

It is not as common for adults to have sealants, but occasionally they do receive them because, after all, cavities are not limited to children. But this is usually determined on a case-by-case basis. Adults should speak to their dentist if they have questions about receiving sealants.

Sealants, which hold up well under the force of daily chewing, generally last from three to seven years; however, they need to be examined at regular dental checkups to ensure that they are not chipped, worn, or damaged. If they are, more sealant material can be quickly and easily applied to the top of the tooth.

The Massachusetts Dental Society recommends that all children get sealants. There is no risk involved in sealing teeth, and the combination of sealants and good home care, including regular brushing and flossing, dramatically reduces the chance of getting cavities. 