Oral Health Tips

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Dental Sealants: Prevent Cavities

What if you could prevent caries (tooth decay and cavities) from forming in your children's teeth? Preventing cavities before they appear can mean less pain and less money spent in the long run. Proper brushing and flossing are essential to removing plaque on the smooth surfaces of teeth to help keep your mouth clean and cavity free. But did you know that the indentations on the chewing surfaces of the back teeth, called pits and fissures, are one of the most common places where tooth decay occurs and is also one of the most difficult surfaces to clean properly? Toothbrush bristles often cannot reach the tiny grooves in these teeth to remove plaque effectively. How can we prevent decay from occurring in these pits and fissures that our toothbrushes cannot reach? One solution may be dental sealants.

What Are Dental Sealants?

A sealant is a plastic film-like material that is applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. The plastic material bonds to the pits and fissures of the chewing surfaces of the back teeth and acts as a barrier to protect the teeth from decay-causing bacteria.

Who Can Benefit from Sealants?

Sealants are most often recommended for children who have newly erupted permanent teeth. First and second permanent molars erupt into the mouth at about the age of 6 and 12, respectively. Having sealants applied to these teeth shortly after they erupt protects them from developing cavities in areas that are difficult to clean. Adults who have cavity free pits and grooves with no fillings in the biting surfaces of back teeth may also benefit from sealants. Also, individuals who experience frequent dry mouth may benefit from the extra protection of sealants as long as they are cavity free with no fillings since their teeth are often deprived of the protective benefits of saliva, which makes them especially vulnerable to cavities.

How Are Sealants Applied to Teeth?

A dentist or hygienist applies sealants. The procedure is simple and fast with very little, if any, discomfort. First, the teeth receiving sealants are cleaned and thoroughly rinsed. An acid solution or gel is then applied to the tooth to help the sealant bond with the tooth. The sealant material is then painted onto the teeth, much like nail polish on a fingernail, and allowed to dry and form a bond on the chewing surface of the tooth. Your dentist may use a special curing light to help the sealant material harden. It usually takes a dental professional only a few minutes to seal each tooth, but once applied, sealants can last from five to ten years.

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How Effective Are Sealants?

Because sealants act as a physical barrier to decay-causing bacteria, sealants are nearly 100% effective in protecting teeth from cavities within pits and fissures when applied properly. Studies have shown that children's permanent molars without sealants are 22 times more likely to develop cavities than those with sealants. Dental sealants are also very cost effective. Having them applied is less than the cost of having a cavity filled.

Prevention is the key to keeping your mouth and teeth healthy. Be sure to brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, clean between your teeth daily with floss, eat healthy foods and visit your dentist regularly. Ask your dentist if you or your children would benefit from the added protection of dental sealants.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org;
Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org;
Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/nohss