
Dental sealants

Summary

- Sealants are put onto teeth to protect them and prevent tooth decay.
- Sealants fill up the small grooves and pits on your teeth that are hard to clean, making a smooth, easy-to-clean surface.
- Tooth brushing, limiting sugary foods and drinks and drinking plenty of tap water also helps to prevent tooth decay.

The chewing surfaces of the back teeth can have tiny grooves, known as fissures. Tooth decay can easily start in fissures where food can get stuck and where it is hard to clean. These grooves are too small for the bristles of toothbrushes to get in to clean.

Sealants are thin plastic coatings that cover the chewing surface of back teeth. They help to prevent tooth decay by creating a smooth, easier to clean surface. Sealants were developed in the 1960s and have been widely used since then.

Causes of tooth decay

Everybody has the bacteria that cause tooth decay living in their mouth. When you eat, the bacteria eat too. They feed on sugars in the food and drinks you consume, and they produce acid, which damages the tooth surface (the enamel). Over time, this damage can lead to a cavity or 'hole' in the tooth.

Benefits of dental sealants

Sealants are used to fill up the small grooves or fissures in your back teeth, keeping food and bacteria out and preventing decay.

There are several benefits to using sealants. They:

- are white or clear
- fill and block up the small pits and grooves in the teeth to prevent decay
- take a few minutes to apply
- do not cause pain
- do not require you to have any injections or drilling
- do not dissolve in saliva
- are safe.

Sealants are put on by an oral health professional (dentist, dental therapist or oral health therapist). They usually last from two to seven years, but can last much longer. Sealants need to be checked regularly by your oral health professional.

Most decay starts in the narrow pits and grooves on the biting surfaces of the back teeth (molars). The permanent molars have the highest risk of tooth decay and benefit the most from dental sealants.

For most children, the first permanent molars come through at about six or seven years of age and the second molars about age 11 or 12 years. As the molars come through, they are at greater risk of tooth decay. At these times, it is particularly important to keep up with your child's regular dental check-ups.

Procedure for putting on dental sealants

The oral health professional will:

- prepare your teeth by cleaning and drying them
- put on the sealant – a thin layer of plastic liquid is painted into the pit (similar to the way nail polish is painted onto a fingernail)
- set the sealant – the sealant is set and becomes hard using a special light.

Other tips to help prevent tooth decay

Steps you can take to help prevent tooth decay include:

- Brush your teeth and along the gum line twice a day, in the morning and before bed.
- Over 18 months of age, use a fluoride toothpaste. Use 'low fluoride' for children aged 18 months to six years of age, and 'standard fluoride' for people six years and older.
- Follow the **Australian Dietary Guidelines** and enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups every day.
- Avoid sugary foods and drinks, especially between meals.
- Drink plenty of tap water. Most of Victoria's drinking water has fluoride, which helps to repair damage to teeth.
- Have regular dental check-ups. Ask your oral health professional how often you should have a check-up.

Where to get help

- Your dentist
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provides public dental services through the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne and community dental clinics, for eligible people. For more information about public dental services Tel. **(03) 9341 1000**, or **1800 833 039** outside Melbourne metro
- **Australian Dental Association 'Find a Dentist'** search function or Tel. **(03) 8825 4600**

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