

More Low-Income Kids Need Dental Sealants: CDC

Treatments protect against most cavities -- reducing pain and dental costs

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TUESDAY, Oct. 18, 2016 (HealthDay News) -- Treatments that seal a child's back [teeth](#) can prevent most [cavities](#), but many kids -- particularly those living in poverty -- don't get them, U.S. health officials said Tuesday.

Dental sealants are liquid plastic coatings painted on chewing surfaces of [teeth](#). When dried, they quickly harden to form a shield on the teeth, which can last for years.

Sealants can cut [cavities](#) by 80 percent for up to two years, and by 50 percent for up to four years, a new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows.

"Unfortunately, most kids don't have them -- 40 percent of kids have dental sealants, but 60 percent don't," CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden said during a Tuesday media briefing. "Kids without dental sealants have almost three times more cavities than those who do have sealants."

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Poor children are more than twice as likely as kids in more affluent families to have untreated [tooth decay](#), the report found. And that's why the CDC wants sealant treatments offered in schools across the country.

"School-based sealant programs can be a win-win," Frieden said. "Governments, schools, parents and kids all come out ahead. Dental sealants are simple, quick, easy and completely painless, there are no unwanted side effects and the benefits start immediately."

School programs are especially important for children from low-income families, because they are less likely to receive [dental care](#). Sealant programs target schools with a lot of children who have free or reduced-cost meal programs, Frieden explained.

Cavities can be prevented by providing sealants around age 6 for the permanent first molars and around age 12 for the second molars, Frieden said. A dental sealant can guard against cavities for up to nine years, the report said.

Frieden added that progress has been made with dental sealants in the past decade. In that period, the number of children from low-income families who had dental sealants increased nearly 70 percent.

"This prevented about 1 million cavities, but still, poorer children are 20 percent less likely to have sealants than children from higher-income families," he said. "Every tooth that gets sealant saves more than \$11 in dental costs."

Sealants for nearly 7 million low-income children in schools could save up to \$300 million in [dental care](#) costs, the research showed.

But school-based programs depend on state support, and many states don't have these programs in the schools where they are most needed, Frieden said.

In addition, these programs depend on federal money, which is insufficient, he said. And some states have requirements that drive up costs, like requiring a dentist to be present when sealants are applied. Sealants are covered by [Medicaid](#) and other children's health programs, he noted.

Parents should ask their dentist about sealants, and if the school has a sealant program they should get their children signed up, Frieden said. If the school doesn't have a program, then parents should push for one, he said.

"We need to do more to reach children who need dental sealants and don't have them today," Frieden said.

One pediatric dentist thinks sealants are a good idea, but noted they won't guard against all cavities.

"Sealants have proven to be helpful in the prevention of cavities, but only on the top of the tooth," said Dr. Rosie Roldan, director of the pediatric dental program at Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami.

Although sealants will help in the prevention of cavities, cavities can also happen in between the teeth, so kids will still need to have checkups, she said.

It's wise for parents to get sealants for their kids' teeth, because "those teeth are going to be there for them [in the] long haul," Roldan said.

The sealant research was published Oct. 18 in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.