OCTOBER 2016

CDC Vitalsigns™

Dental Sealants Prevent Cavities

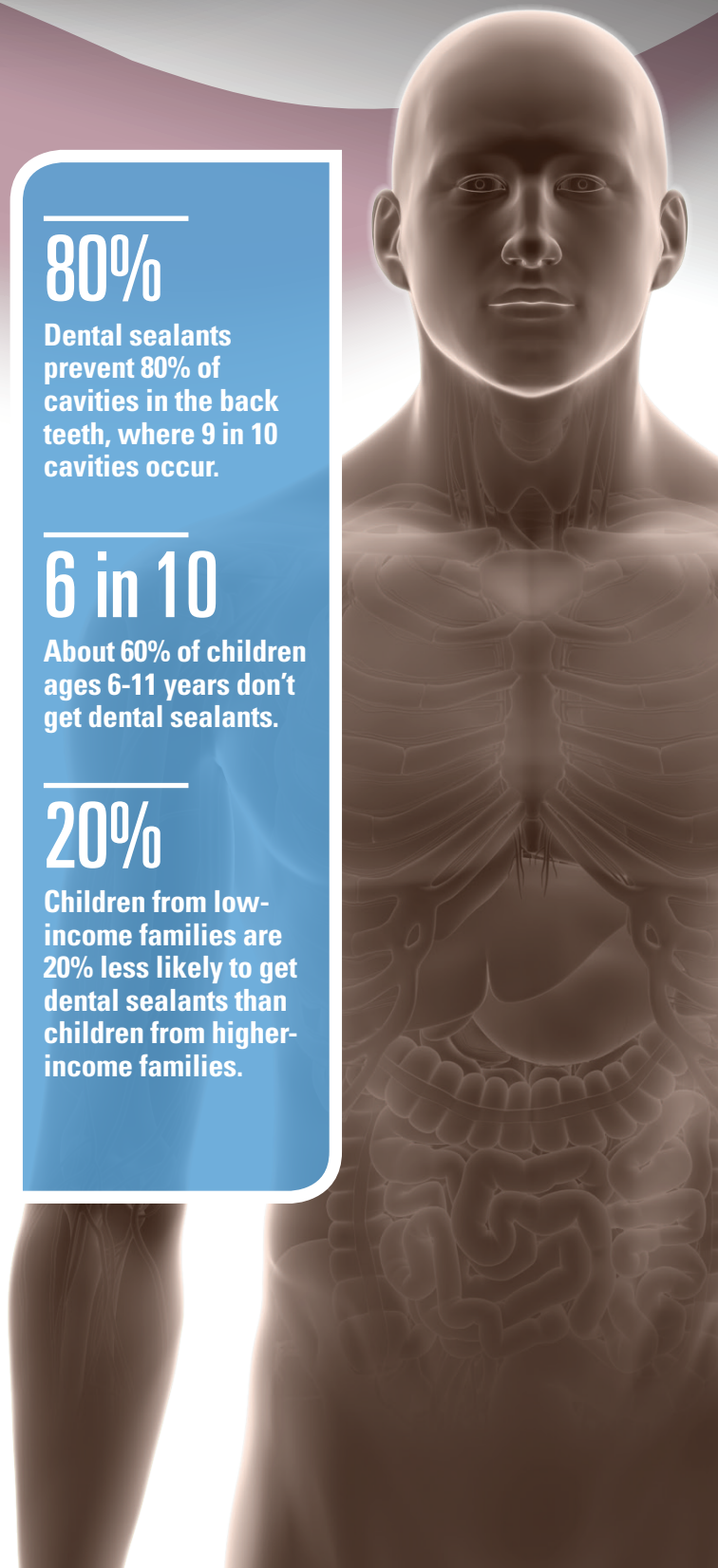
Effective protection for children

Dental sealants are thin coatings that when painted on the chewing surfaces of the back teeth (molars) can prevent cavities for many years. School-age children (ages 6-11) without sealants have almost 3 times more 1st molar cavities than those with sealants. Although the overall number of children with sealants has increased over time, low-income children are 20% less likely to have them and 2 times more likely to have untreated cavities than higher-income children. Untreated cavities can cause pain, infection, and problems eating, speaking, and learning. States can help millions more children prevent cavities by starting or expanding programs that offer dental sealants in schools.

State officials can:

- Target school-based sealant programs to areas where children are at higher risk for cavities. Track the number of schools and children participating in sealant programs.
- Implement policies that allow school-based sealant programs to operate in the most cost-effective manner.
- Help schools connect to Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), local health department clinics, community health centers, and dental providers in the community to foster more use of sealants and reimbursement of services.

Want to learn more?
www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/dental-sealants



80%

Dental sealants prevent 80% of cavities in the back teeth, where 9 in 10 cavities occur.

6 in 10

About 60% of children ages 6-11 years don't get dental sealants.

20%

Children from low-income families are 20% less likely to get dental sealants than children from higher-income families.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Problem:

About 7 million low-income children need sealants.

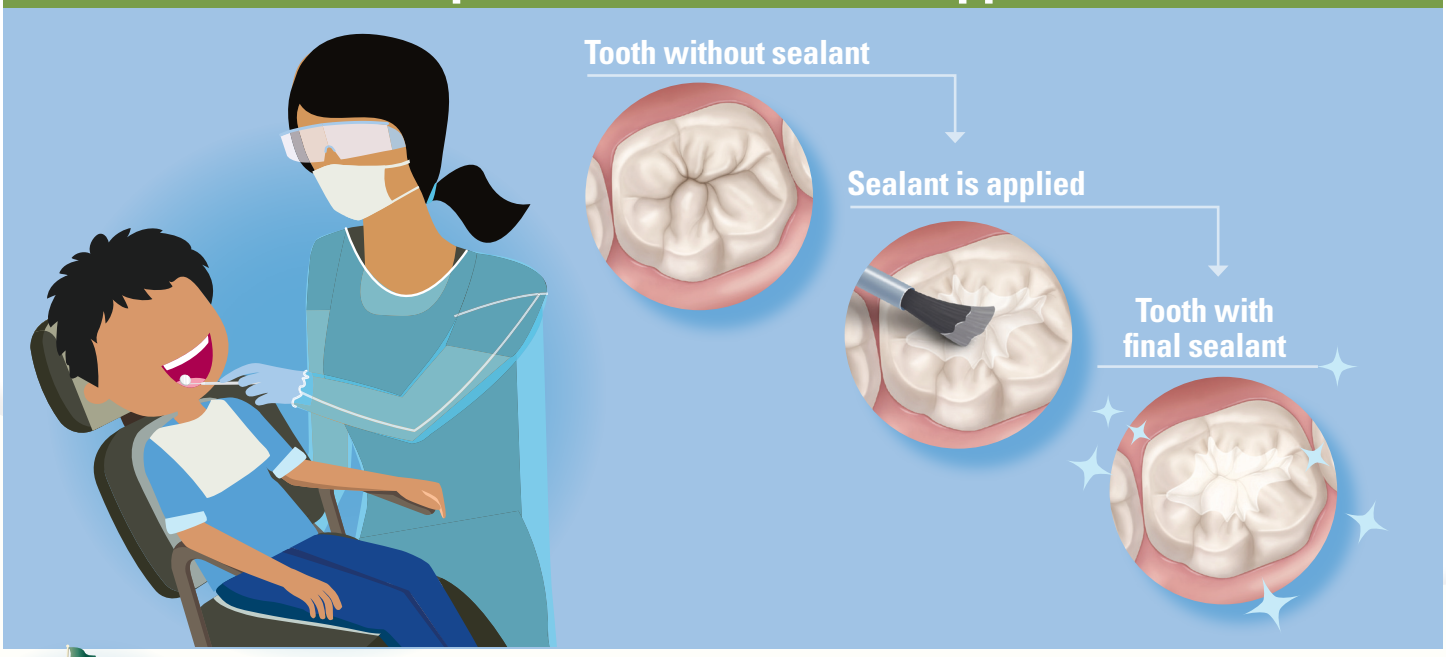
What are sealants?

- Sealants are thin coatings painted on teeth to protect them from cavities. They flow into the deep grooves of teeth and harden immediately so a child is able to chew right away.
- Sealants prevent the most cavities when applied soon after permanent molars come into the mouth (around age 6 for 1st molars and age 12 for 2nd molars).
- Sealants can be applied by a dentist, dental hygienist, or other qualified dental professional, depending on state law and regulations. This can be done in dental offices or using portable dental equipment in community settings like a school.

Why use sealants?

- Sealants are a quick, easy, and painless way to prevent most of the cavities children get in the permanent back teeth, where 9 in 10 cavities occur.
- Once applied, sealants protect against 80% of cavities for 2 years and continue to protect against 50% of cavities for up to 4 years.
- Sealants can eliminate the need for expensive and invasive treatments like dental fillings or crowns.
- Applying sealants in schools for about 7 million low-income children who don't have them could save up to $300 million in dental treatment costs.

Dental sealants can prevent cavities when applied to molar teeth.



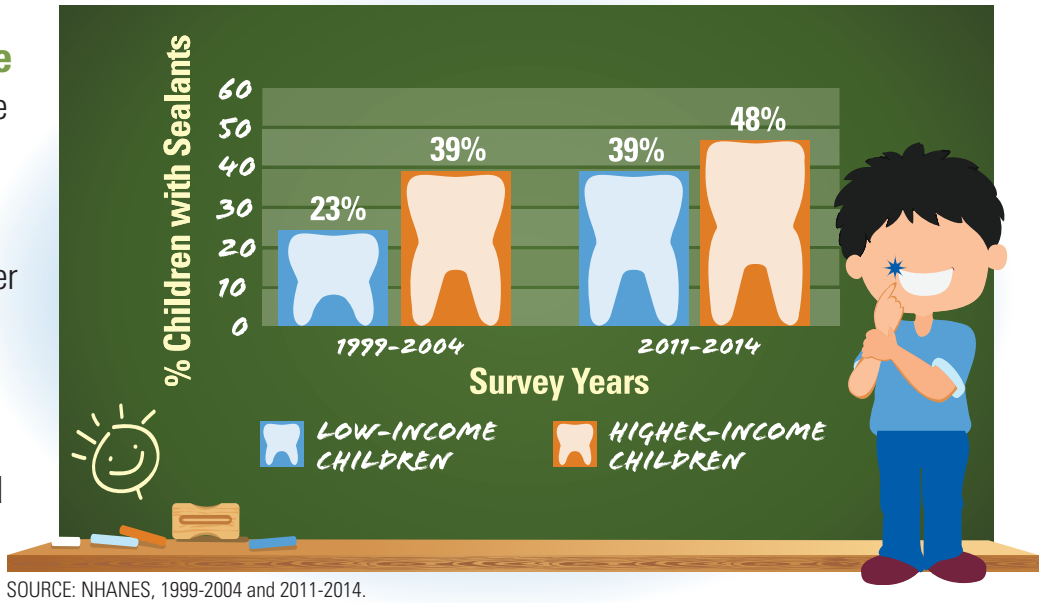
School-based programs are one way to reach millions of children with sealants to prevent cavities.

School-based sealant programs are effective but underused.

Sealant Use

Disparities are decreasing over time

The number of low-income children with sealants increased by about 70% from 1999-2004 to 2011-2014, and the number of higher-income children with sealants increased by 23%. The increase in sealants among low-income children prevented almost 1 million cavities.*

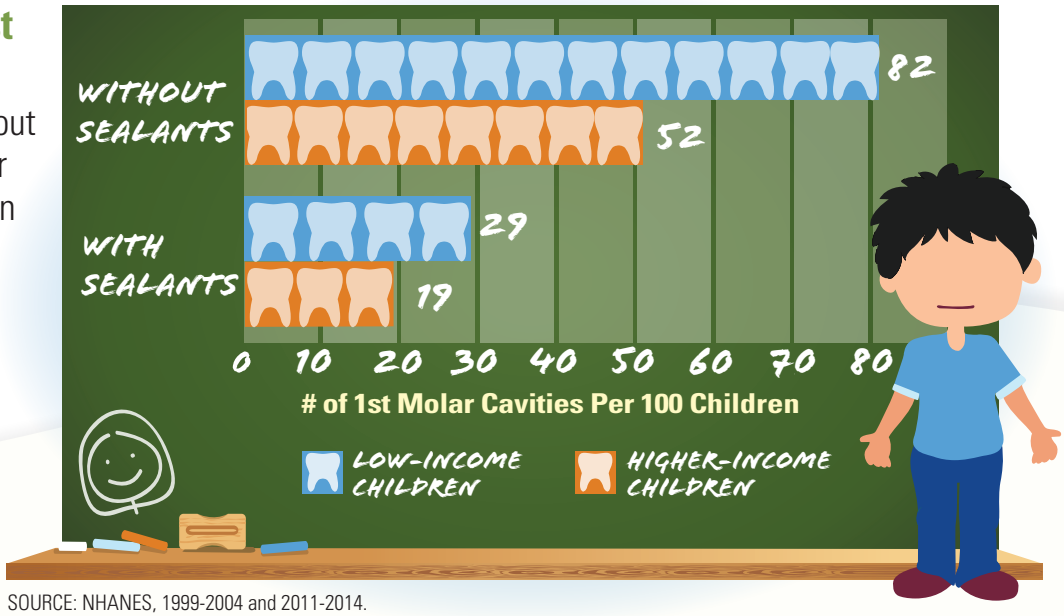


SOURCE: NHANES, 1999-2004 and 2011-2014.
*Journal of Public Health Dentistry, 2014: http://bit.ly/2cZXOYh

Cavities

Disparities still exist

Low-income children without sealants have about 60% more cavities in their 1st permanent molars than higher-income children.



SOURCE: NHANES, 1999-2004 and 2011-2014.

What Can Be Done?

The Federal government is

- Classifying pediatric dental services as an essential health benefit to be covered by dental insurance as part of the Affordable Care Act.
- Matching state costs for applying dental sealants for all children enrolled in Medicaid/CHIP and tracking program performance.
- Encouraging community health centers with dental programs to start or expand school-based sealant programs to help more low-income children.
- Helping fund states to increase the number of dental sealant programs.
- Providing incentives for dentists to practice in under-served areas to increase access to dental services.

State officials can

- Target school-based sealant programs to the areas of greatest need. Track the number of schools and children participating in sealant programs.
- Implement policies that deliver school-based sealant programs in the most cost-effective manner.
- Help schools connect to Medicaid and CHIP, local health department clinics, community health centers, and dental providers in the community to foster more use of sealants and reimbursement of services.

Dental care providers can

- Apply sealants to children at highest risk of cavities, including those covered by Medicaid/CHIP. Donate time and resources to a school-based dental sealant program.
- Learn about school-based dental sealant programs and their effectiveness.
- Accept children into their practice who are identified as needing more services when they receive sealants in schools.

School administrators can

- Work with the local or state public health programs and local dental providers to start school-based sealant programs.
- Support having sealant programs in schools and promote its benefits to teachers, staff, and parents. Help children enroll in sealant programs by putting information for parents in registration packets in the beginning of the school year.
- Encourage schools to develop relationships with local dental offices and community dental clinics to help children get dental care.

Parents can

- Ask your child's dentist to apply sealants when appropriate.
- Sign your child up to participate in a school-based sealant program. If your school does not have a sealant program, ask them to start one.
- Find a dentist if your child needs one. Use the Insure Kids Now Dentist Locator: http://bit.ly/2dwnU5E

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www.cdc.gov

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1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30329
Publication date: 10/18/2016

CS267223