



Fluoride Varnish:

An Effective Way to Prevent Tooth Decay

Why is putting fluoride varnish on children's teeth recommended?

Tooth decay is one of the most common preventable diseases seen in children occurring in babies as young as 12-18 months. Since cavities in baby teeth may cause pain and even prevent children from being able to eat, speak, sleep and learn properly, it is important to address this issue early. Applying fluoride varnish on a child's teeth can not only prevent cavities, but also help minimize the damage of existing cavities. Fluoride varnish can also be effective for adults with high rates of tooth decay, or seniors at risk of getting tooth decay on the roots of their teeth.

What is fluoride varnish?

Fluorides have been used for many years to help prevent dental decay. Today, most dental professionals apply fluoride in their offices as a foam, gel or varnish. Fluoride varnish (5% sodium fluoride) is a protective coating that is painted on teeth to help prevent new cavities and to help stop cavities that have already started. It has been widely used in Europe for several decades and its use is increasing in the United States. Varnish comes in tubes for multiple applications using a cotton swab or as prepackaged single doses with a small disposable applicator brush.

How is fluoride varnish different from other professionally applied fluoride?

Fluoride varnish offers several advantages over other professionally applied fluorides:

1. Varnish now comes in child-friendly flavors and is easily tolerated, especially by infants, toddlers and developmentally disabled children.
2. Dentists and other health care providers find it easy to use and fast to apply. Fluoride varnish can be swabbed directly on the teeth in less than three minutes and sets within a minute of contact with saliva. Gels and foams require use of suction, air-drying the teeth, trays that may trigger gag reflexes and several minutes of contact with the teeth.
3. Fluoride varnish is safe and poses less risk of an adverse reaction because only a small amount is used and less is swallowed.
4. It can be applied in any setting and does not require the use of dental equipment or instruments.

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Which children would benefit most from fluoride varnish?

Fluoride varnish is not a substitute for fluoridated water or toothpaste, but provides an added benefit (up to 38%) for children who are at high risk for dental decay. Some factors that put children at high risk include insufficient sources of dietary fluoride, high-carbohydrate diets, parents or caretakers with tooth decay who then transmit decay-causing bacteria to their children via their saliva, areas of tooth decalcification, reduced salivary flow and poor oral hygiene. The younger the child is when the varnish is applied to the primary teeth, the better — usually as soon as the front teeth erupt in the mouth.

Is fluoride varnish safe?

Fluoride varnish is safe, and can be used on babies from the time they have their first teeth. This method of providing fluoride to teeth has been used in Europe for more than 30 years. Fluoride varnish is approved by the FDA and is endorsed by the American Dental Association.

How is fluoride varnish put on the teeth?

Your child's dentist will remove plaque and food debris from the teeth with a toothbrush, cotton gauze or a cotton roll. Then, the dentist will paint the varnish on all sides of the teeth in a quick and painless process. The varnish appears to have a slight yellow or tooth-colored tint to enable the dentist to determine the amount applied, and will come off when the teeth are brushed. Your child can leave immediately after the application, but the layer of varnish needs to remain on the teeth for six to eight hours. Make sure your child doesn't eat or drink anything for 30 to 60 minutes, and don't brush their teeth for about 12 hours after treatment.

Who can apply fluoride varnish?

Dental professionals are not the only health professionals who can apply fluoride varnish. State Medical Boards allow a physician to apply the varnish, and in certain cases, the procedure can also be delegated to a nurse or medical assistant.

Is a single application of fluoride varnish sufficient?

The fluoride coating will work best if it is painted on the teeth at regular intervals.

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