

Talking with Patients

Fluoride Varnishes

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WHAT IS IT?

Fluorides have been used widely in dentistry for over 50 years. Fluorides are available in many forms, such as in toothpastes, mouthrinses, and topical gels and varnishes. Research has demonstrated that fluoride varnishes, in particular, are effective in preventing tooth decay. They are used in dentistry for prevention of dental caries, particularly on smooth tooth surfaces such as root surfaces. Fluoride varnishes also are effective for treating sensitive teeth.

Fluoride varnishes contain active fluoride ions in a base of natural resins. They are painted on the teeth by your dentist with a disposable brush. Some fluoride varnishes are clear, but most result in a light yellow uniform film or coating of the teeth. Once applied the varnish releases fluoride until it dissolves away. Patients are instructed not to eat or brush their teeth for at least 2 hours after the application to avoid premature removal of the varnish coat. The yellow discoloration is temporary and disappears generally within 24 hours.

WHEN IS IT NEEDED?

Fluoride varnishes are effective in the prevention of tooth decay when used in conjunction with a comprehensive oral hygiene program. With regular use, fluoride varnishes also help to relieve tooth sensitivity when applied to exposed root surfaces of teeth. Fluoride varnishes are especially indicated for the prevention of root decay in older patients who experience difficulty cleaning their teeth. For this reason, patients diagnosed to be at a high risk for tooth decay and/or patients with very sensitive teeth may benefit from being treated with a fluoride varnish on a regular basis.

Fluoride varnishes are not useful for treating existing cavities or to relieving sensitivity associated with cavities and/or broken teeth.

Advantages of fluoride varnishes are that they prevent tooth decay, relieve tooth sensitivity, are not expensive, and are safe to use. Disadvantages are that they are not permanent (must be reapplied periodically) and that some temporarily change the tooth color (leave a yellow coating).

CONCLUSIONS

Fluoride varnishes are paint-on gel-like substances that are used for prevention of cavities and treatment of sensitive teeth in children and adults. For best results, fluoride varnishes should be used periodically, in conjunction with a comprehensive oral hygiene program.

The following photographs show a fluoride varnish being applied on the teeth of a patient with a high risk of caries.

