

When It Looks Like a Cavity, But Doesn't Need a Filling

If you or your children have or have had cavities, you're not alone.

Almost all adults and more than two-thirds of kids in the U.S. have them. But about one-third of patients have cavities that are very tricky to diagnose. It may be a tiny hole in the enamel that looks like a stained spot or groove but extends below the surface of the enamel, for example. Some cavities show up only on an x-ray, or a tooth might look like it has a cavity, but the x-ray doesn't show a cavity. **What is the best approach for managing these questionable cavities?**

In a large study by the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network, of which your dentist is a member, dentists examined more than 1,000 questionable cavities. For most, the dentists opted for monitoring or "watchful waiting," which could include a fluoride treatment. For the remaining ones, the dentists either applied a sealant or did a more invasive dental treatment.



Your dentist is part of the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network, a group of dental practices that treat patients and also do dental research. For more information go to www.nationaldentalpbrn.org.



Watchful waiting is often the best choice for questionable cavities

- Almost two years after the study began, most—90 percent—of the untreated questionable cavities continued to be fine and didn't require a filling.
- The others needed a sealant or other type of treatment.
- Of the questionable cavities that dentists initially treated, about half turned out to be small and could have been treated without such an involved procedure.



Why do so many of us have these questionable cavities?

We're getting a lot fewer cavities than we used to, thanks to fluoride. But fluoride has also made it harder to diagnose some cavities, the researchers wrote. Fluoride may limit the damage to the surface of the tooth, but decay can still progress below the surface. (It's still better to use fluoride!)



If your dentist decides to just keep an eye on a questionable cavity, he or she may still want to give you a fluoride treatment or prescribe fluoride for you to use at home. As always, you'll also need to:

- Brush your teeth every day with a fluoride toothpaste
- Clean between your teeth every day with floss or another type of between-the-teeth cleaner
- Limit sweets
- Not smoke or chew tobacco
- See your dentist regularly.