Cavities can be a bit painful and inconvenient, but new data shows that, over a person’s lifetime, a single, initial cavity also has serious economic consequences.

That’s the conclusion of a new report from the Data and Analysis Center (DAC), the nation’s largest claims-based dental health data warehouse, which finds that the average cost to maintain a restored cavity in the molar of a 10-year old reaches $2,187 by age 79. If a patient has several cavities, the cost escalates accordingly.

“There are currently no permanent restorative materials available to treat cavities, so the lifetime cost of maintaining teeth that have been treated for decay far outpaces any out-of-pocket costs you might spend to prevent decay in the first place,” said Max Anderson, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association.

For patients with dental benefits, there is often no out-of-pocket cost for preventive services such as regular examinations. Even if a patient has a co-payment for preventive services, the data clearly shows an investment in prevention is a bargain when compared with the ongoing cost of restoration.

The Data and Analysis Center analyzed more than 77 million claims submitted within the Delta Dental system. The results, in terms of 2003 dollars, showed that over a lifetime it costs $1,788 to maintain a restoration (filling) in an anterior tooth and $2,108 in a premolar.

On average, patients who develop cavities in their molars between ages 7 and 12 require more than $1,000 in services per initial cavity by age 40 and $2,187 by age 79.

This is because fillings wear out over time and have to be replaced with comparatively more expensive crowns. The lifetime cost of a cavity also increases when a tooth requires a root canal or extraction and replacement with a prosthetic tooth.

“The conclusion is, over a lifetime, just one cavity is expensive—two or more drive expenses well above the lifetime cost of preventive care,” said Dr. Anderson. “When a patient works with his or her dentist, cavities are almost entirely preventable. We hope this illustration provides another incentive for people to maintain their oral health.”

The Data Analysis Center is an investor-owned, for-profit company of dental science experts and business analysts who manage the country’s most extensive claims-based dental health data warehouse. DAC evaluates treatment outcomes based on evidence from millions of dental insurance claims submitted from every state in the nation.

Northeast Delta Dental regularly submits data to the Data and Analysis Center. Through DAC affiliation, it benefits from analyses of the impact of treatment over a much larger population of patients than would be possible otherwise.