

Fighting cavities with fluoride



Teeth are coated with a thin layer of bacteria called plaque. These bacteria feed off the sugars you eat or drink, and some make acids that cause cavities. Fluoride helps fight these “acid attacks.”

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM FLUORIDE?

Infants and children whose teeth are still developing

When children eat food or drink beverages that contain fluoride, it is carried to teeth developing beneath the gums.

Children and adults whose teeth have erupted

Fluoride that comes in contact with tooth surfaces helps strengthen enamel and fight cavities.

HELPING KIDS GET THE RIGHT AMOUNT

Children who are waiting for permanent teeth to erupt need the right amount of fluoride. Too little can increase the risk of cavities, but too much can cause fluorosis—light spots or lines that develop on teeth still growing beneath the gums.

Here are some things you can do to help children get the right amount of fluoride:

- Watch how much toothpaste they use. Children younger than 3 years should use no more than a smear of toothpaste, about the size of a grain of rice. Anyone older should use a pea-sized amount;
- Do not allow children younger than 6 years to use fluoridated mouthrinses, unless your dentist recommends one;
- Spit out toothpaste and rinses. These products protect tooth surfaces. They have more fluoride than needed in the diet for cavity protection, and swallowing them regularly may increase the risk of fluorosis;
- Use fluoride supplements as directed by your dentist.

SOURCES OF FLUORIDE

The best sources of fluoride are fluoridated water, fluoride toothpastes and mouthrinses, and fluoride treatments from your dentist.

Fluoridated water

Many communities add fluoride to the water supply to help prevent cavities. The ideal fluoride level for cavity prevention is 0.7 milligrams of fluoride per liter of water (0.7 mg/L). About 75% of people in the US receive fluoridated community water.¹ If you have a private well, you can have your water tested for fluoride.² Talk to your dentist or physician about the

level of fluoride in your water. If it is low, he or she might suggest a fluoride supplement.

Bottled water may or may not contain fluoride. If it is not listed on the label, check with the manufacturer to find out how much fluoride the bottled water has.

Fluoride toothpastes

Everyone should brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. Remember to keep an eye on how much toothpaste is being used (see above).

Fluoride mouthrinses

Some mouthrinses contain fluoride. Ask your dentist whether you or your child would benefit from adding a fluoride mouthrinse to the daily oral care routine.

Fluoride treatments from your dentist

Your dentist may apply a fluoride gel or varnish to help protect against cavities. If the risk of cavities is high, your dentist may prescribe a mouthrinse or toothpaste with more fluoride than the ones you can buy over the counter.

CONCLUSIONS

Fluoride helps prevent cavities. Talk to your dentist about the fluoride needs of you or your child. ■

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You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community water fluoridation: fluoridation growth data table. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/statistics/fsgrowth.htm>. Accessed May 22, 2019.
2. U. S Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Water. Manual of individual and non-public water supply systems. Available at: <https://nepis.epa.gov/Exec/QueryPDF.cgi/2000U9HN.PDF?Dockey=2000U9HN.PDF>. Accessed April 26, 2019.