
DENTAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

FLUORIDE

Cavities used to be a fact of life. But over the past few decades, tooth decay has been reduced dramatically. The key reason: fluoride. Research has shown that it reduces cavities between 20-40 percent in children, and 15-35 percent in adults. It also helps repair the early stages of tooth decay even before the decay becomes visible.

THERE ARE NUMEROUS BENEFITS OF FLUORIDE.

TRUE! Fluoride, when added to community water supplies, is the single most effective public health measure we have to prevent tooth decay and improve oral health for a lifetime. Also, products containing fluoride stop the growth of newly formed cavities and can prevent formation of cavities on the roots of teeth.

FLUORIDE IS AVAILABLE FROM A NUMBER OF SOURCES.

TRUE! All water contains some fluoride naturally, in amounts greater or lesser than that needed to contribute to oral health benefits. Water fluoridation is the process of adjusting the natural level of fluoride to the concentration necessary for protection against tooth decay. Another way to receive fluoride is by using oral care products such as toothpastes, mouthrinses, varnishes, and gels. In fact, over 90 percent of toothpastes and many mouthrinses contain fluoride. Both systemic fluoride (fluoride that comes from eating foods and drinking liquids) and topical fluoride (fluoride that is applied to the surfaces of the teeth) work together to keep teeth strong.

FLUORIDE IS ONLY BENEFICIAL TO CHILDREN.

FALSE! Fluoride benefits people of all ages. For example, when children are young and their teeth are still forming, fluoride works by making tooth enamel harder and more resistant to the acid that causes tooth decay. In addition, fluoride helps repair the early stages of tooth decay even before they become visible in the mouth, a process known as remineralization. Studies indicate that people who drink optimally fluoridated water from birth will experience up to 40 percent less decay over their lifetimes. For adults, the benefits are just as great. And for older adults who experience problems with root caries (decay along the gumline), fluoride has been effective in decreasing this condition.

WATER FLUORIDATION IS EXPENSIVE.

FALSE! Not only is fluoridation an oral health benefit, it's also economical! The average cost for a community to fluoridate its water is estimated to be 50 cents a year, per person. Over a person's lifetime, that's less than the price of having one cavity treated. In light of increasing health care costs, fluoridation is presently the most cost-effective way we have to prevent tooth decay.

WATER FLUORIDATION IS SAFE.

TRUE! Since the 1930's, hundreds of carefully conducted scientific studies have shown that water fluoridation, at the concentrations recommended for good oral health, has no harmful effects. Fluoridation of community water supplies is a valuable public health measure supported by the American Dental Association, the World Health Organization, the U.S. Public Health Service, the American Medical Association and the American Cancer Society.

PARENTS SHOULD MONITOR THEIR CHILDREN'S TOOTH BRUSHING HABITS.

TRUE! We encourage parents to take an active role in their children's oral health and one way to do so is to supervise their brushing habits. Children should be told to use only a small amount of toothpaste and not to swallow toothpastes and mouthrinses.

FLUORIDE IS ALL THAT'S NEEDED TO PREVENT TOOTH DECAY.

FALSE! While it is true that fluoride is instrumental in preventing tooth decay, fluoride alone cannot prevent dental disease. To help, we recommend brushing twice a day, flossing daily and eating well-balanced meals. Regular dental check-ups and evaluation for dental sealants also are recommended.

DENTAL FLUOROSIS IS NOT A SERIOUS DENTAL PROBLEM.

TRUE! Dental fluorosis occurs when the natural fluoride content is too high and children drink this water when their permanent teeth are forming. Only a very small percentage of children experience this condition. Dental fluorosis is generally a mild condition unnoticeable to most people. It is characterized by lacy white lines or specks in the teeth and is not harmful to the patient's health.

DRINKING OPTIMALLY FLUORIDATED WATER WILL NOT CAUSE DENTAL FLUOROSIS IN CHILDREN.

TRUE! Drinking optimally fluoridated water and properly using products containing fluoride will not cause dental fluorosis. Drinking water fluoridated at the recommended level will not cause fluorosis or unsightly stained teeth.

THERE IS NO LINK BETWEEN FLUORIDE AND CANCER.

TRUE! The U.S. Public Health Service completed an extensive study of the benefits and risks of fluoride. Their report concluded that "optimal fluoridation of drinking water does not pose a detectable cancer risk to humans." The report went on to say that fluoride's "benefits are great and easy to detect."

CHILDREN LIVING IN COMMUNITIES WITHOUT FLUORIDATED WATER CAN STILL ENJOY THE BENEFITS OF FLUORIDE.

TRUE! In such communities, dentists and physicians may prescribe fluoride tablets or drops for children to take daily. Children also may benefit from fluoride mouthrinses at home or school, or the application of fluoride solutions, varnishes or gels in the dental office.

ALL BOTTLED WATER CONTAINS THE ADEQUATE AMOUNT OF FLUORIDE NEEDED TO PREVENT TOOTH DECAY.

FALSE! All water contains some fluoride naturally. However, unless the fluoride content is printed on the label, don't assume bottled water contains adequate fluoride to prevent tooth decay. It may be necessary to contact the manufacturer to obtain this information.