

Fluoride to Prevent Tooth Decay

What is fluoride?

Fluoride is a mineral your body needs to grow and be healthy. Fluoride makes teeth and bones strong, and it protects your teeth against decay. It can be found naturally in all soil, plants, animals and water.

How does fluoride help your teeth?

Fluoride is needed for infants and children, when teeth are still forming under the gums. The fluoride ingested at this time, in water or from vitamins that contain fluoride, deposits itself into the outer part of the tooth and makes the tooth stronger and better able to fight decay.

Fluoride also works after the teeth erupt and are present in your mouth. At this time, fluoride from water, food, toothpaste, mouthrinses and fluoride treatments received in a dental office washes over the teeth and helps to prevent decay or even stops small areas of decay that have already started. The fluoride makes the outer surface of the teeth stronger.

What is the best Way to Get Fluoride?

Even though natural fluoride is found in food, plants, animals and water, the amount is usually too low to provide the best protection from decay. Illinois communities add small amounts of fluoride to their water supplies. This practice, called water fluoridation, ensures that the water contains the optimal level of fluoride. Drinking fluoridated water from birth can reduce decay by 40 percent to 65 percent.

People living in rural areas with private water wells do not have the benefits of water fluoridation. If, upon testing, a well's natural fluoride content is insufficient, a dentist or physician can prescribe a vitamin with fluoride, in tablet or drop form. For best results, these tablets or drops should be taken from 6 months of age through 14 years of age.

Some Illinois schools offer a fluoride mouthrinse program. The children who participate in this program swish with a fluoride mouthrinse once a week in the classroom. This program has been shown to reduce decay by 35 percent.

Another way to get fluoride is through dental products such as toothpastes or mouthrinses that have the seal of the American Dental Association on the label. These products are good for children and adults, regardless of whether they drink fluoridated water.

For more information, contact

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NOTE: This fact sheet was derived from one previously published by the Arizona Department of Health Services.