



Fluoride for Children

Why Fluoride Is Important for Healthy Teeth During Childhood

What Is Fluoride?

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that helps strengthen teeth and protect them from cavities. It is found naturally in water, soil, and some foods, and it is also added to many toothpastes, mouth rinses, and community water supplies.

Fluoride is one of the most effective tools for preventing tooth decay in children and adults.

Why Do Children Need Fluoride?

Children's teeth are especially vulnerable to cavities as they develop.

Fluoride helps by:

- Strengthening developing enamel
- Making teeth more resistant to acid attacks
- Replacing minerals lost during the early stages of tooth decay (remineralization)
- Slowing the progression of early enamel damage

Children who receive appropriate fluoride exposure generally have fewer cavities than those who do not.

Where Do Children Get Fluoride?

Children may receive fluoride from several sources:

- Fluoride toothpaste
- Community fluoridated drinking water
- Professional fluoride varnish
- Prescription fluoride supplements (when recommended)
- Certain foods and beverages

Most children receive enough fluoride through a combination of these sources.

When Should Fluoride Toothpaste Be Used?

The **American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD)** and the **American Dental Association (ADA)** recommend using fluoride toothpaste **as soon as the first tooth erupts**.

Parents should supervise brushing to ensure the correct amount is used.

How Much Fluoride Toothpaste Should Children Use?

Children Younger Than 3 Years

Use a **smear (rice-sized amount)** of fluoride toothpaste.

This small amount provides protection while minimizing the amount swallowed.

Children 3 Years and Older

Use a **pea-sized amount** of fluoride toothpaste once the child can reliably spit it out.

Parents should continue supervising brushing until the child develops adequate hand coordination, usually around **6 to 8 years of age**.

Should Children Swallow Toothpaste?

No.

Children should be encouraged to:

- Brush thoroughly.
- Spit out excess toothpaste.

- Avoid swallowing toothpaste.

Young children naturally swallow some toothpaste, which is why using the recommended amount is important.

What Is Fluoride Varnish?

Fluoride varnish is a concentrated fluoride coating applied by a dental professional.

It helps:

- Strengthen enamel
- Reduce the risk of cavities
- Protect newly erupted teeth
- Support the repair of early enamel damage

Children at increased risk of cavities may benefit from regular fluoride varnish applications.

What About Fluoride Supplements?

Fluoride supplements are **not necessary for every child**.

They may be recommended only if:

- The child is at increased risk of tooth decay.
- Drinking water contains little or no fluoride.
- A dentist or physician determines supplementation is appropriate.

Do not give fluoride supplements without professional guidance.

Is Fluoride Safe for Children?

Yes.

Fluoride is considered **safe and effective** when used according to professional recommendations.

Major organizations supporting appropriate fluoride use include:

- American Dental Association (ADA)
 - American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD)
 - American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
 - World Health Organization (WHO)
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What Is Dental Fluorosis?

Dental fluorosis is a change in the appearance of tooth enamel caused by excessive fluoride exposure while permanent teeth are developing.

Most cases are **mild** and appear as faint white lines or small white spots on the teeth.

Dental fluorosis usually:

- Does not cause pain
- Does not weaken the teeth
- Does not affect tooth function

Using the correct amount of fluoride toothpaste helps minimize this risk.

How Parents Can Help

Parents can support healthy teeth by:

- Brushing their child's teeth twice daily.
 - Using the recommended amount of fluoride toothpaste.
 - Encouraging children to spit out toothpaste.
 - Offering fluoridated drinking water when available.
 - Scheduling regular dental checkups.
 - Discussing fluoride needs with their child's dentist.
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Common Myths

"Fluoride is only important after permanent teeth appear."

False.

Fluoride helps protect baby teeth as soon as they erupt and supports healthy development of permanent teeth.

"More fluoride is always better."

False.

Children should receive the **appropriate amount** of fluoride. Excessive fluoride intake during tooth development may increase the risk of mild dental fluorosis.

"Baby teeth don't need fluoride because they fall out."

False.

Healthy baby teeth are essential for chewing, speaking, jaw development, and guiding permanent teeth into their proper positions.

When Should Parents Talk to a Dentist?

Ask your child's dentist if you have questions about:

- The fluoride level in your drinking water.
- Whether your child needs fluoride varnish.
- Which toothpaste is appropriate for your child's age.
- Whether fluoride supplements are recommended.
- The appearance of white spots or discoloration on your child's teeth.

Your dentist can provide personalized recommendations based on your child's oral health and cavity risk.

Key Takeaways

✓ Fluoride is one of the most effective ways to prevent cavities in children.

- ✓ Begin brushing with a **rice-sized smear** of fluoride toothpaste when the first tooth appears.
 - ✓ Use a **pea-sized amount** for children **3 years and older** who can spit out toothpaste.
 - ✓ Fluoride varnish provides additional protection for children at increased risk of cavities.
 - ✓ Fluoride supplements should only be used when recommended by a healthcare professional.
 - ✓ Regular brushing, healthy eating habits, and routine dental visits work together to keep children's teeth healthy.
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References

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