



Preventive Treatment for Tooth Decay provided by Oral Health Professionals

Fluoride is a chemical compound that helps strengthen tooth enamel and protect the teeth from the harmful bacteria that cause cavities. It can even help reverse tooth decay that has already begun when used in the very early stages of decay.

A child can receive fluoride in two ways, by ingesting the fluoride or applying it to the tooth surfaces. A child can swallow fluoridated water (where the local water supply has been treated with fluoride) or be prescribed fluoride drops (liquid) or fluoride tablets (chewable). Topical fluorides reach the teeth directly by using fluoride toothpaste, and fluoride treatments applied by a dental professional (fluoride varnish). Fluoride varnish must be applied by a dental or other health professional. It is painted directly onto a child's teeth with a brush. It has a pleasant taste and it is quick and easy to apply and is painless for the child. It stays on the teeth for 24 hours and is effective at protecting the child's teeth from decay for about 3 to 6 months (Healthy Smiles curriculum).

Fluoride is absorbed by the tooth, which makes the tooth stronger and more resistant to decay. Toothpaste is intended to provide a *topical* source of fluoride; it is NOT supposed to be swallowed by the child. Swallowing too much toothpaste with fluoride over a long period of time may cause the teeth of a child under the age of 10 to develop slight white speckling. More serious effects or fluoride toxicity could occur if a child ingests a large amount of fluoride toothpaste at one time. If this occurs, you should **call Poison Control immediately at 1-800-222-1222**.

Dental sealants are another method used to protect the teeth from decay. Sealants are thin plastic coating applied to a child's back teeth (called molars) by a dental professional. They fill in the grooves of the teeth where food and bacteria that lead to tooth decay frequently become trapped. Usually dental sealants are applied to permanent teeth, however, if a child's baby molars have deep grooves, sealants can be effective protection against tooth decay. Sealants are also often applied to primary teeth in high risk children. A child's first permanent molars come in around age 6, and the second molars appear around age 12. Dental sealants can last as long as 5 to 10 years but must be checked regularly and reapplied if they are no longer in place.

Xylitol is a naturally occurring sugar that promotes oral health. Xylitol reduces plaque formation and bacterial adherence, reduces acid production on enamel, and has a direct effect on inhibiting the proliferation of *Streptococcus Mutans*. Xylitol is available in many forms, such as, gum, mints, chewable tablets, candies, toothpaste, mouthwashes, and cough mixtures. (AAPD Policy on the Use of Xylitol in Caries Prevention – online).