

Fluoride: Not Just Kid Stuff



You don't have to be a kid to have a cavity. Tooth decay does not discriminate by age. By the same token, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) wants you to know that fluoride is not just kid stuff. Adults benefit from fluoride use just as much as children do.

In fact, a study published last year in the *Journal of Public Health Dentistry* reported that older adults might actually benefit more than children from community water fluoridation. The study, which looked at dental care costs among nearly 52,000 members of one insurance plan in the states of Oregon and Washington, found that those living in areas with fluoridated drinking water spent less on dental fillings than those without fluoridated water supplies. When the researchers took it a step further and looked at health plan members by age, they discovered that the benefits of fluoridation were seen in children and to an even greater extent in adults older than age 58.

But this isn't to say that those between the ages of 18 and 57 don't need fluoride too. Fluoride use is important at every age. Fluoride helps prevent dental caries (tooth decay) and can even help repair teeth in the very early microscopic stages of the disease, according to the American Dental Association (ADA). And while the rate of tooth decay for adults and children has declined dramatically over the past 30 years, the average adult still develops, on average, one new cavity a year. Even after a long period of having little or no difficulties with tooth decay, adults can go through stages where their teeth are more susceptible to problems, and fluoride can help.

Animal? Vegetable? Mineral!

What exactly is fluoride? Fluoride is a compound of the element fluorine, which is found naturally in water, soil, and air, as well as in many foods. Existing in living tissue, fluoride is absorbed easily into tooth enamel, helping to strengthen it. It is also very effective in preventing cavities from forming.

Fluoride comes in two forms: topical and systemic. Topical fluoride strengthens teeth already in the mouth by making them more resistant to decay. Examples of this type of fluoride include tooth-

paste, mouthrinses, and professionally applied treatments. It's been well documented that one of the most effective ways to fight tooth decay is to brush at least twice a day with a toothpaste containing fluoride. The other type of fluoride, systemic, is swallowed and distributed through the bloodstream to the teeth. Available methods of systemic fluoride include fluoride tablets, vitamins, and fluoridated water.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fluoridating community water is one of the greatest public health achievements in the last century; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Public Health Service, and the U.S. Surgeon General, among others, have also publicly supported community water fluoridation for dental decay prevention.

Bottled Up

In our on-the-go society, however, many adults today get their drinking water primarily from a bottle. If you're one of the Americans who consumed more than 8.25 billion gallons of bottled water in 2006, according to the International Bottled Water Association, then you may be missing out on the benefits of fluoride because the majority of bottled waters do not contain it. Studies indicate that people who drink optimally fluoridated water from birth will experience approximately 35 percent less tooth decay over their lifetime.

How can you tell if you're getting the correct amount of fluoride from bottled water? Read the label. Although some bottled water products are optimally fluoridated, fluoride levels vary from manufacturer to manufacturer, and most fall below 0.7 mg/L, according to the ADA. The U.S. Public Health Service has established 0.7 to 1.2 mg/L, or ppm (parts per million), as the optimal range for community water fluoridation. (One ppm is equal to one mg/L.)

However you get it—toothpaste, fluoride treatments, tap water, bottled water, or any combination—the important thing is that you get it. Using fluoride is one of the best things you can do for your oral health, at any age. 

For more information on fluoride or your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747, or visit www.massdental.org.