

Fluoride for Children: Parent FAQs

Fluoride helps prevent tooth decay and makes your child's teeth stronger. Fluoride can be found in drinking water, food and beverages, toothpaste, mouth rinses, and dental treatments such as fluoride varnish.

Here are some common questions you may have about how fluoride helps keep your child's teeth healthy.

Why do children need fluoride?

Fluoride is a natural mineral that can slow or stop cavities from forming. We all have bacteria in our mouth that combine with food and drink sugars to make acid. The acid harms the outer layer of the tooth, called the enamel. Fluoride protects teeth from acid damage and helps rebuild tooth enamel.

That is why many communities add fluoride to the tap water. Children should drink plenty of [water](#) and brush with toothpaste containing fluoride.

Is fluoride in drinking water safe for my children?

Yes. America has been preventing tooth decay with fluoridated water for over 75 years.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Dental Association, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agree that [water fluoridation](#) is effective, safe and works to prevent tooth decay.

Fluoridation benefits people of all ages. Community water fluoridation has been shown to reduce tooth decay by 25%.

Is fluoride linked to IQ?

Fluoride at the recommended level in drinking water [has not](#) been linked to lower IQ scores. Some studies, including from the U.S. government, have noted a possible link between [very high fluoride](#) levels in drinking water—more than twice the level of fluoride in U.S. drinking water—and lower IQ scores in children. The findings were based on studies in non-U.S. countries where some pregnant women and children were exposed to total amounts higher than 1.5 mg of fluoride per liter of drinking water.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) continues to [recommend](#) age-appropriate amounts of fluoride toothpaste and fluoridated water to protect children's teeth. Talk to your pediatrician about fluoride supplementation if you live in an area or are served by a water system without fluoridation.

When should my child start using fluoride toothpaste?

The AAP recommends using a smear or grain of rice-sized fluoride toothpaste twice a day when the first tooth appears and until age 3. Once they turn 3, a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste can be used.

Teach your child to spit when they are able. They do not need to rinse their mouth with water after brushing.

What if we live in a community where the water is not fluoridated? What can we do?

Check with your local water utility or look on the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) website to find out if your water has fluoride. If it does not have fluoride or you have [well water](#) that does not contain fluoride, ask your pediatrician or dentist if your child is at high risk for cavities. The doctor may recommend buying fluoridated water or prescribing fluoride drops or tablets for your child.

Should my child get fluoride varnish?

Yes. [Fluoride varnish](#) is used to help prevent or slow down tooth decay. Your pediatrician or dentist can apply the varnish after your baby gets their [first tooth](#). (Try to make your baby's first dental appointment after the first tooth appears.)

The varnish is painted on the top and sides of each tooth and hardens quickly. After 4 to 12 hours, parents brush it off at home. It is recommended that children have varnish applied 2 to 4 times per year.

What should I know about fluoride if breastfeeding or using infant formula?

When younger than 6 months old, [breastfed](#) babies and babies fed infant formula, do not need fluoride supplements or formula mixed with fluoridated water. It is safe to use fluoridated water to mix the [formula](#) if your baby is younger than 6 months old, but there is a small risk of "fluorosis." (See more details below.) Ask your pediatrician or dentist if you need more advice.

If you prefer not to use fluoridated water with formula before your baby's first tooth emerges, you can:

- Use bottled or purified water that has no fluoride to mix with the formula.
- Use [ready-to-feed](#) formula that does not need water to be added.

What is dental fluorosis, and will fluoridated water mixed with infant formula increase the risk?

[Fluorosis](#) usually appears as very faint white streaks on the teeth. Often, it is only noticeable by a dental expert during an exam. Mild fluorosis is not painful and does not affect the function or health of the teeth.

Although using fluoridated water to prepare infant formula might increase the risk of dental fluorosis, most cases are mild.

Once your child's adult teeth come in (usually around [age 8](#)), the risk of developing fluorosis is over.

Should pregnant people switch to bottled water?

Bottled water is not preferred to tap water during pregnancy unless there are concerns about tap water contamination. Bottled water may or may not contain fluoride. The amount of fluoride in bottled water does not need to be listed unless the label claims the product's fluoride content.