



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Health



# Brush Up on Oral Health

April 2013

- **All About Fluoride**
- **Understanding Tooth Decay**
- **How Does Fluoride Prevent Tooth Decay?**
- **Helping Parents Prevent Tooth Decay with Fluoride: What Head Start Staff Can Do**
- **Cook's Corner: Corn and Black Bean Salad**

## Did You Know?

Fluoride is the 13th most common element in the earth's crust. When groundwater passes over rocks and soil, the groundwater picks up fluoride. As a result, small amounts of fluoride are present in all water sources.

The first community to fluoridate its water was Grand Rapids, MI, in 1945. Since then, more than 200 million people have benefitted from one of the nation's greatest public health achievements:

## All About Fluoride

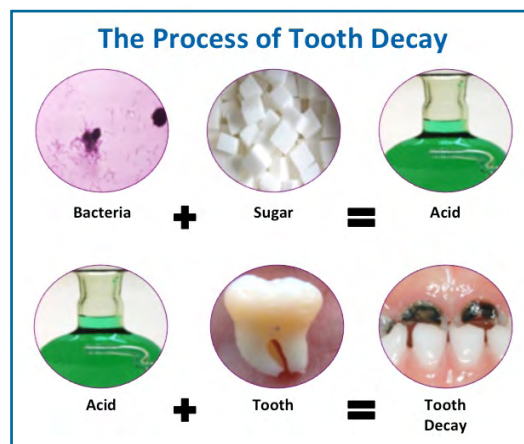
Fluoride is the safest and best way to prevent tooth decay. So, many communities add fluoride to their public water supply. Fluoride is also found in most toothpaste brands and can be professionally applied using varnish or gel.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* focuses on understanding how tooth decay happens, how fluoride works to prevent it, and what Head Start staff can do to educate parents about the benefits of fluoride and how to use it to prevent tooth decay.

## Understanding Tooth Decay

Tooth decay can be explained using a simple equation:

1. Bacteria that causes tooth decay breaks down sugar in food to produce acid.
2. Acid removes minerals from the outer tooth surface (enamel). Over time, acid wears the tooth surface down, causing a cavity (hole) in the tooth.



## How Does Fluoride Prevent Tooth Decay?

Fluoride protects teeth from developing tooth decay in three ways.

1. It makes teeth strong and more resistant to acid.
2. It puts minerals (fluoride) back into teeth that have early stages of tooth decay.
3. It interferes with bacteria's ability to make acid.

## Helping Parents Prevent Tooth Decay with Fluoride: What Head Start Staff Can Do

In addition to promoting toothbrushing with toothpaste with fluoride in Head Start classrooms (see [Brush Up on Oral Health, October 2012](#)), there are many ways that Head Start staff can encourage parents to use fluoride to prevent tooth decay, for example:

- Reassure parents that tap water with fluoride is safe. This is especially important for new immigrants who are from countries where drinking tap water is not safe. Tell parents that it's important to drink tap water instead of bottled water because bottled water may not have fluoride. If a family's water source is not fluoridated, a dentist or doctor can prescribe fluoride drops or tablets.



Smear: Under Age 2



Pea-Sized: Age 2 and Older

- Encourage parents to brush their child's teeth in the morning and before bed using toothpaste with fluoride. And tell parents to place the toothpaste on the child's toothbrush and not to let children do that by themselves. For children under age 2, parents should use a smear of toothpaste. For children ages 2 and over, they should use a pea-sized amount. Children can spit out any remaining toothpaste but should not rinse after brushing. **Please note:** The American Dental Association released new recommendations in April 2014 for fluoride toothpaste for young children. (See the [September 2014](#) issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* for information).
- Help parents find a dental practice that sees young children and provides fluoride varnish treatments.

## Cook's Corner: Tips for Encouraging Children to Drink Water



Here are tips for encouraging children to drink fluoridated water during the day.

**Make it fun:** Drink from single-use bendy, silly, or colored straws. Or children can choose their favorite cups or water bottles.

**Keep it portable:** Water bottles that can be carried anywhere and refilled with tap water are great.

**Flavor it:** Children used to drinking juice, juice drinks, or pop (soda) may think water is too plain. Add a lemon, lime, or orange slice or fresh mint leaves to the water. Or add fruit like blueberries, raspberries, or strawberries.

**Ice it:** Serve water with ice cubes or crushed ice. Look for ice cube trays in fun shapes like dinosaurs, letters, or animals.

**Make it available:** Set up a station where children can get a drink of water whenever they are thirsty. It can be as simple as keeping a non-breakable water pitcher on a low counter or a chair where young children can reach it.

**Model it:** Young children learn by watching. Be a good role model by drinking water instead of drinks that have sugar.

## Contact Us

National Center on Health *Brush Up on Oral Health* Newsletter Staff

Katrina Holt: [kholt@georgetown.edu](mailto:kholt@georgetown.edu) • (202) 784-9551

Beth Lowe: [eal38@georgetown.edu](mailto:eal38@georgetown.edu) • (202) 687-1864

The National Center on Health welcomes your feedback on this issue and suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to [nchinfo@aap.org](mailto:nchinfo@aap.org) or call (888) 227-5125.

Subscribe or view all issues of *Brush Up on Oral Health* at [Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center](#).

This newsletter was prepared under grant #9OHC0005 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Health. This publication is in the public domain, and no copyright can be claimed by persons or organizations.