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Dental Care: Fluoride and Your Teeth

Fluoride plays an important role in keeping teeth healthy by helping to prevent tooth decay. That's why fluoride is added to many toothpastes and why fluoride treatment has become a routine part of dental cleanings.

Fluoride is actually derived from fluorine, a prevalent element found within the Earth's crust. Fortunately, most people get the fluoride their teeth need from their drinking water.

How can fluoride help prevent tooth decay? It does so two ways. First, part of the fluoride that enters the bloodstream travels to the teeth and once there, helps strengthen enamel. The enamel is the translucent material that covers your teeth.

Stronger enamel helps minimize the effects of demineralization - the loss of minerals caused by the damaging acids the bacteria in plaque produce. Demineralization will weaken a tooth's enamel over time, making it more susceptible to decay. As the enamel decays, it's more susceptible to dental cavities.

The other way fluoride benefits teeth is during the remineralization process. Remineralization is the body's natural way of replenishing the minerals that have been lost via the demineralization process. Each time you drink milk, for example, a portion of the minerals contained in milk head to the teeth to assist with remineralization.

Fluoride works the same way. As it enters the body, either via drinking water, mouthwash, toothpaste or topical application, it helps enamel replenish its supply of fluoride. While remineralization is taking place, it has the added benefit of slowing down plaque's ability to produce damaging acids.

To supplement or not? That's a controversial question and the bottom line is this. If your drinking water supply is not fluorinated, you should inquire about receiving fluoride supplements.

Children between the ages of 6 months and 16 years especially need fluoride as it's the most effective way there is so far to keep dental decay under control. A dentist or your child's doctor can prescribe fluoride in liquid or tablet form when deemed necessary.

Most people who get their drinking water from a ground water supply or from a water processing plant get an adequate amount of fluoride. However, those who purchase bottled water may have a problem because fluorine is not added to many brands.

While bottled water may have other benefits, its lack of fluoride may outweigh those benefits. If you drink bottled water and you're unsure whether it contains fluoride, check the ingredients listed on the label.

The controversy surrounding fluoride centers on the possibility of getting too much into your system. Like other vitamins and minerals, too much may cause problems. The most common result of excess fluoride is fluorosis, which may be unsightly, but isn't harmful. Fluorosis is a condition in which the enamel becomes discolored or mottled.

Fluoride toxicity is more serious and occurs when a large amount of fluoride is ingested in a short time. Its symptoms include nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, pain in the abdomen and abnormal thirst.

Since this occurs most frequently in small children, it's important to keep toothpaste out of children's reach and to supervise children while they brush their teeth.

[Cav's Note: Did you know that most commercial oral care products "cover-up" bad breath instead of prevent it? [Learn more here.](#)]

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