Preventing tooth decay with fluoride treatments

Tooth decay (cavities) is one of the most common diseases in children. Babies as young as a year old can have cavities. Cavities can cause pain and infection, making it hard to eat or sleep. It can also cause a child to lose teeth before adult teeth are ready to come in. This can cause problems in the way teeth fit together.

The good news is tooth decay is easy to prevent. Good brushing and flossing are important, and so is fluoride.

Your child may get fluoride from the water he or she drinks. Call your local government office to find out if your water has fluoride added to it. You can also choose a fluoride toothpaste for your child. Another important step you can take is having your dentist or another health care provider apply fluoride varnish to your child’s teeth.

What is fluoride varnish?
Fluoride is a coating painted on teeth with a brush or cotton swab to help prevent new cavities from starting and stop the spread of cavities that have already started. Fluoride now comes in flavors children like and is painless. All a child needs to do is not eat or drink for 30-60 minutes to let the fluoride harden.

Is it safe?
Fluoride is even safe for babies because a small amount is used and even less is swallowed.

Who should get a fluoride treatment?
Fluoride varnish is important for all children but even more for children who do not have fluoride in their water or eat a lot of carbohydrates — food with lots of sugar, like cookies, candy and cake.

It’s also very important for children whose parents or other caregivers have tooth decay. Germs from an adult’s mouth can be spread to a child’s mouth through shared spoons and kissing on the mouth. That’s why taking care of your teeth is just as important as caring for your child’s teeth.
When should I take my baby in to get a fluoride treatment?

The younger the child is when the varnish is applied to the baby teeth, the better. Baby should see the dentist for a check-up and fluoride as soon as the first tooth comes in. Fluoride can be painted on the teeth then and put on again every three to six months to make sure teeth stay healthy.

How often should my child go to the dentist?

Ask your dentist, but most children should be seen twice a year. Seeing a dentist will help keep your child cavity-free and allows your dentist to check for changes in your child’s teeth and gums.

Your dentist can tell you how to keep your child’s teeth clean, provide fluoride to help keep teeth healthy and offer tips on good home care, such as the types of food that are good and bad for your child’s teeth.

Brush and floss your child’s teeth until about age seven to make sure they are clean. After that time, you may need to check your child’s teeth for a couple of years to make sure he or she does a good job of brushing and flossing.

Don’t put baby to bed with a bottle.

Do not send your child to bed with a bottle of milk or juice. Sugar in milk and juice can pool around baby’s teeth and cause serious decay. A bottle with water is a better choice.

Learn more about caring for your child’s teeth—and your own!