



Brush Up on Oral Health

Understanding Why Community Water Fluoridation Is Important

Fluoride is a mineral found in nature, including in soil, rocks, and plants. Fluoride is important because it prevents tooth decay. All water naturally has fluoride, but amounts vary. Since most water doesn't have enough natural fluoride to prevent tooth decay, many towns and cities add fluoride to their water supply. This is called "community water fluoridation." Because community water fluoridation is effective in helping to prevent tooth decay, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named it one of the 10 great public health achievements of the 20th century.



This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet talks about why community water fluoridation is important. It offers tips for Head Start staff to help parents choose fluoridated tap (faucet) water for their family where it is available.

How Community Water Fluoridation Works

Community water fluoridation works in two ways. First, drinking tap water with fluoride strengthens children's permanent teeth that have not come into the mouth yet. This helps prevent tooth decay. Second, when children and adults drink tap water with fluoride, fluoride goes into the saliva. Fluoridated saliva washes the teeth and makes the outsides of the teeth strong. This also helps prevent tooth decay.

Children and adults who drink tap water with fluoride have:

- Fewer cavities
- Less need to have teeth pulled
- Less pain and suffering from tooth decay

Strategies to Help Parents Choose Fluoridated Tap Water for Their Family

- **Teach parents about fluoride and fluoridated tap water.** Many parents have heard about fluoride and fluoridated water but don't know that it prevents tooth decay. Putting up [I Like My Teeth posters](#) about fluoridated tap water can motivate parents to talk about it.

- **Help parents find out if the family’s water is fluoridated.** To find out if a family’s water is fluoridated, go to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [My Water’s Fluoride](#) website. Choose your state and county to find a list of communities with fluoridated water. Your [state oral health program](#) can tell if your community water is fluoridated. State oral health programs can also help families on well water find out if their water has enough fluoride. If the well water doesn’t have enough fluoride, encourage parents to talk to their dentist or doctor about a fluoride supplement (tablets or drops) for their child. See Brush Up on Oral Health: [Facilitating the Use of Fluoride Supplements](#).



- **Explain to parents that tap water is safe to drink.** In most communities in the United States, tap water is safe to drink. But some parents, especially those from other countries, don’t know that. These parents may give their child bottled water instead. Most bottled water does not contain fluoride. If parents have questions about the safety of their local water, they can contact the [Environmental Protection Agency Drinking Water Hotline](#) at safewater@epa.gov or at 800-426-4791. Head Start health managers can also contact their [state office of oral health](#) or their [state dental hygienist liaison \(DHL\)](#) for more information about drinking water safety in their communities.
- **Educate parents that tap water is cheap and easy to find.** Help parents learn they can save money and time if their family drinks tap water instead of bottled water. Parents don’t have to go to store to buy water. It comes from the faucet at home. Drinking tap water instead of bottled water is also good for the environment, because it reduces the use of plastic bottles.
- Other strategies for encouraging children to drink tap water can be found in Healthy Habits for Happy Smiles: [Encouraging Your Child to Drink Water](#).

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