By age five, nearly 50 percent of children have one or more cavities in their mouth. Dental decay in baby teeth can affect permanent teeth and cause future dental and health problems. Dental decay is caused by exposure of the teeth to sugars in the diet. Bacterial plaque found in the mouth digest the sugars, producing an acid that breaks down hard tooth enamel. This action leads to tooth or dental decay.

The best protection against dental decay is to teach your child good dental habits. These include seeing a dentist regularly, using a fluoride toothpaste and taking fluoride supplements – especially if your child is considered at high risk for dental decay.

How to prevent tooth decay - brush!

- Even before your baby’s first tooth appears, clean gums with a washcloth after feedings.
- Once teeth emerge, brush them with a fluoride toothpaste on a soft toothbrush two times a day: after breakfast and before bedtime.
  - Apply a rice-grain size of toothpaste for infants to age two years and pea-size amount for children three years and older.
  - Teach children to spit. We recommend avoiding rinsing as this will encourage children to swallow.
  - Supervise and assist with brushing until age 8 years.

Avoid exposures

- **Never** put your child to bed with a bottle or food, as this exposes the teeth to sugars.
- Wean your child from a bottle by age 1 year.
- If your toddler must have a bottle or sippy cup during non-mealtimes, or for sleep, fill it **only** with water.
- Avoid soda; sweetened drinks; fruit juice; sticky, sugary foods, such as dried fruits, chewy candies and other sweets; and starchy foods like chips, cookies and crackers. If they do eat these items, brush **immediately** afterward or rinse their mouth with water.
Avoid exposures (continued)

- Snacks such as cheese, yogurt, fruit and vegetables are better for teeth.
- To avoid spreading cavity-causing germs, don’t put anything in your child’s mouth that has been in an adult’s mouth: toothbrush, pacifier, spoons and cups.

See a Dentist

- All children should have a dental home by age one year, or as soon as teeth appear.
- Schedule regular visits with your dentist: twice a year for exams, cleaning and fluoride varnish application.
- Fluoride varnish is applied to the tooth surface every 4-6 months. It penetrates and binds to the tooth, making the surface harder.
- Sealants are coatings that fill the tiny grooves on permanent back teeth and help prevent cavities. These are applied around age 6-8 years.

Fluoride recommendations

- Fluoride is nature’s cavity fighter, a natural mineral found in nearly all water sources. In Whatcom County, fluoride is deficient in the drinking water supply and is not added. The Lummi Nation and the City of Lynden are two exceptions where fluoride is added to the community drinking water.
- Research shows that fluoride in community water has lowered tooth decay rates by over 50 percent.
- Fluoride makes the tooth structure stronger, so teeth resist acid attacks from bacteria found in plaque.
- Fluoride repairs areas where the tooth was already damaged.
- Fluoride helps fight bacteria that cause decay.

How much fluoride should my child have?

- If your child consumes a typical diet, drinks fluoridated water and uses fluoride toothpaste, then they will receive the fluoride they need for healthy teeth.
- If your child does not drink fluoridated water, or your child has a higher risk for cavities (using a bottle in bed, prolonged sippy-cup use, visible cavities, frequent snacking, family history of dental decay, not regularly brushing with fluoride toothpaste and no regular dental care) then fluoride supplements are recommended.
- Fluoride comes as liquid drops or chewable tabs that can be prescribed by your child’s primary care provider or dentist. These are recommended starting at age 6 months until the teeth have fully formed, as the fluoride is incorporated into the tooth structure. These also provide surface protection.
- Too much fluoride can cause fluorosis in developing permanent teeth. This may appear as tiny white specks or streaks on the tooth after they have erupted in the mouth. Care should be taken to prevent ingestion of excess fluoride. Discuss the amount of fluoride your child is receiving with your physician or dentist.