**Protecting Your Teeth**

Today, cavities are one of the most common childhood diseases in the US. Cavities and tooth decay aren’t only painful, but they also lead to missed days of school or work, trouble eating or learning, and lower self-esteem. The key to preventing cavities is practicing good dental hygiene at home, which is especially important in rural Alaskan communities that have limited access to dental care.

Cavities are caused by bacteria that live in our mouths. When these bacteria eat the left-over food and sugar in our mouths, they make acid that eats away our teeth and forms holes, called cavities. If caught early, cavities can heal, but if left untreated, the bacteria can get deeper into the tooth and cause bigger, more painful problems. Cavities are even considered contagious since the bacteria can spread between people when sharing food or utensils. Fortunately, there are ways to prevent tooth decay from happening in the first place.

Ways to can prevent cavities:

* Avoid sugary food and drinks.
* Brush with fluoride toothpaste 2 times a day (supervise children as they brush).
* Floss daily.
* Visit the dentist regularly even if your teeth feel healthy.

One of the most effective ways to protect the dental health of a whole community is by fluoridating tap water. Fluoride prevents cavities by making teeth stronger and healthier. Fluoride is naturally present in all water and community water fluoridation just slightly adjusts the level to reduce cavities by 20-40%. Alaskan children living in communities that don’t fluoridate have a 32% higher rate of tooth decay compared to Alaskan children in communities that fluoridate. Fluoridating water is considered one of the top 10 greatest public health achievements in the 20th century.

Cavities and other dental decay issues are common and painful concerns for many Alaskans. However, they are preventable by remembering to take care of our teeth and drinking fluoridated water. For more information, please contact the ANTHC Field Environmental Health Program at (907) 729-4043 or ceh@anthc.org.

