



Community Water Fluoridation Fact Sheet

IMPORTANCE OF FLUORIDE

Fluoride is a naturally-occurring mineral and is found in all water sources (lakes, rivers, groundwater and in the oceans). Community water fluoridation is the process of adjusting the natural fluoride concentration of fluoride-deficient water to a level recommended for prevention of dental caries, approximately 1 ppm (one part per million). This process would be similar to the practice of fortifying salt with iodine, milk with vitamin D or orange juice with vitamin C. Currently, about 40 other ingredients are already added to our drinking water to make it palatable and safe.

Fluoride protects teeth in two ways – systemically and topically. Systemic protection occurs when fluoride is ingested by young children as it helps to strengthen their future teeth. Topical protection, probably the most important protective mechanism, occurs after the tooth has erupted above the gum. This topical effect happens when small amounts of fluoride are maintained in the mouth in saliva and dental plaque (the film that adheres to tooth enamel). The fluoride keeps the tooth enamel strong and solid by preventing the loss of important minerals. In this way, fluoride works by stopping or even reversing the tooth decay process in children and adults.

FACTS ABOUT WATER FLUORIDATION

Fluoridation of drinking water is considered as one of the ten great public health achievements in the 20th century and has been used successfully in the United States for the last 60 years. It is the single most effective way to prevent tooth decay and improve oral health over a lifetime, for both children and adults.

Water fluoridation has helped improve the quality of life in the U.S. through reduced pain and suffering related to tooth decay, reduced time lost from school and work, and less money spent to restore, remove, or replace decayed teeth. About two thirds or 170 million people in the United States are currently served by fluoridated public water systems.

Fluoride was first used to prevent tooth decay in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1945 by adjusting the level of fluoride in drinking water. Since the 1950s, every Surgeon General has committed his or her support to community water fluoridation. More than 100 national and international health service agencies and professional organizations recognize the benefits of community water fluoridation in preventing dental decay.

Fluoridation of community water has been credited with reducing tooth decay by 50 to 60 percent in the United States since World War II. More recent estimates of this effect show decay reduction at 18 to 40 percent, even in an era with widespread availability of fluoride from other sources, such as fluoride toothpaste.^{1,2}

Good scientific evidence supports the use of community water fluoridation and the use of fluoride dental products for preventing tooth decay for both children and adults.

Community water fluoridation is an effective, safe, and inexpensive way to prevent tooth decay for all citizens, regardless of their age, gender or socioeconomic status.

WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US

The majority of Americans approve of water fluoridation. Results of a national survey conducted in June 1998 by the Gallup Organization showed that 73 percent in the Northeast, 72 percent in the Midwest, 68 percent in the South and 70 percent in the West favored community water fluoridation.³

Of the 50 largest cities in our country, 43 are already fluoridated.

In the most recent scientific review of 113 articles from 23 countries (59 of which were conducted in the U.S.)⁴, it was observed that dental decay was reduced by:

- 40 to 49 percent in the primary dentition or baby teeth,
- 50 to 59 percent in the permanent teeth or adult teeth.

In a second scientific review of studies conducted from 1976 through 1987¹, when data for different age groups were separated, reductions in dental decay in fluoridated communities were:

- 30 to 60 percent in the primary dentition or baby teeth,
- 20 to 40 percent in the mixed dentition (both baby and adult teeth – children aged 8 to 12),
- 15 to 35 percent in permanent dentition or adult teeth (adolescents aged 14-17, adults and seniors).

It has been estimated that 51 million school hours are lost per year in U.S. because of dental-related illness.⁵ Poor oral health has

been related to decreased school performance, poor social relationships and less success later in life.⁶

The average cost for a community to fluoridate its water is estimated to range from approximately \$0.50 a year per person in large communities to approximately \$3 a year per person in small communities. For most communities, every \$1 invested in water fluoridation saves \$38 in dental treatment costs.⁷

Children aged 6 years or younger may develop enamel fluorosis if they ingest more fluoride than needed. Enamel fluorosis is a light, chalk-like discoloration (white spots) of tooth enamel ranging from very mild to severe forms. About 94 percent of fluorosis seen today remains largely limited to the very mild to mild categories.⁸

A review of recent studies indicated that only about 13 percent of all dental fluorosis may be attributed to water fluoridation.⁹ The inappropriate use of topical fluoride-containing dental products is the largest risk factor for increased fluorosis.¹⁰

Parental supervision of fluoride toothpaste use among all children six years or under will limit excessive use and ingestion and can reduce the occurrence of white spots while preventing early tooth decay. Supplements and high-concentration fluoride dental products should be used judiciously and always in consultation with the child's dentist.¹¹

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