



Frequently asked questions about water fluoridation

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All water supplies contain fluoride



FACTS ABOUT WATER FLUORIDATION

- Fluoride is a natural substance found in water, soil and common foods.¹
- Water fluoridation prevents dental decay in all ages.³
- It is a safe, legal and efficient way of providing benefit to everyone in the community, especially those who are disadvantaged.³
- Even though fluoride toothpaste is widely available, there is still substantially more tooth decay in non-fluoridated areas compared with fluoridated areas in Australia.²

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recognised water fluoridation as one of the 10 great public health achievements of the 20th Century.

What is fluoride?

Fluoride is a naturally occurring element found in soil, rocks, sea water, ground water and some common foods, including tea and seafood.¹

What is water fluoridation?

All public water supplies naturally contain some fluoride, but many do not have enough fluoride to protect against tooth decay. Water fluoridation is the process of adding fluoride to the drinking water source so that the amount of fluoride in the water reaches the level recommended for preventing tooth decay.²

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay is preventable and reversible if it is discovered in the early stages⁴ and this is where fluoride can help. Decay occurs when plaque bacteria produce acids from the sugars and refined carbohydrates we eat and drink.⁴ In the early stages, the minerals lost from the teeth following an acid attack are replaced during a natural recovery or remineralisation process. But if there is too much sugar, eaten or drunk too often throughout the day, the acid attack exceeds the recovery and cavities can form.⁴

Fluoride helps in the recovery by making teeth more resistant to the acid attack and reversing the very early stages of mineral loss. Tooth decay is one of the most common health problems in Australia and the world.^{4,5} It can result in pain, infection and tooth loss, which can lead to a reduction in overall wellbeing and quality of life.⁶ In addition to affecting people's eating, sleeping and socialising, untreated tooth decay is one of the most common reasons for avoidable hospitalisations in Australia.⁷ Tooth decay causes people concern, affects their quality of life and is also very expensive to manage.⁶

Is water fluoridation safe?

Water fluoridation has been established as a safe and effective public health measure after extensive research. The scientific evidence indicates that there are no adverse general health effects associated with public water fluoridation at the recommended level.³ The safety and effectiveness of water fluoridation is reviewed periodically by authoritative bodies in Australia and internationally.

Australia's leading expert body developing health advice, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), has conducted several reviews on the efficacy and safety of water fluoridation. Information from the comprehensive review on the health effects of water fluoridation conducted during 2014–2016 reaffirms:

- Water fluoridation is effective in reducing dental decay
- There is no evidence of any negative health effects associated with water fluoridation at recommended levels in Australia.³

Is it ethical?

Following a thorough review of the evidence, the NHMRC recommends community water fluoridation as a safe, effective and ethical way to help reduce tooth decay.³

Water fluoridation is able to reach the most disadvantaged members of society in a way that many other oral health interventions cannot. While there are some within the community who oppose this approach on the basis that it impacts personal choice, ADAVB supports fluoridation as an effective way to protect the most vulnerable members of the community and promote good oral health for all.

Who benefits from water fluoridation?

In Australia there is consistent evidence that water fluoridation at the current Australian level of 1 mg/L (1ppm) is associated with reduced rates and severity of tooth decay in children, adolescents and adults.^{2,3}

Water fluoridation can help to reduce tooth decay in the community regardless of age, individual motivation, socioeconomic status or the availability of dental care. These benefits are greatest for children and those on a lower income who tend to have higher rates of decay.³

The belief that only children benefit from fluoride is outdated. Fluoride helps to prevent decay when it is incorporated into the developing tooth enamel of young children, but also when it is present in the mouth, on the surfaces of the teeth. For this reason, the beneficial effect of water fluoridation is available to individuals of all ages with teeth.²

Why fluoridate water when fluoride is widely available from other sources, like fluoride toothpaste?

In Australia, the main access to fluoride is from water fluoridation and fluoride toothpaste. Current research in Australia has reaffirmed a continued benefit of water fluoridation in tooth decay prevention.⁸ These findings show that tooth decay was lower among children in areas with water fluoridation than non-fluoridated areas.⁸ This indicates that water fluoridation provides decay-prevention benefits additional to those provided by other fluoride sources alone.²

Are Australians in support of water fluoridation?

Recent evidence shows consistent community support for water fluoridation.⁹ Since 2007, reports on the attitudes of Australians towards water fluoridation in various regions of Australia has documented that 60 per cent to 87 per cent were in favour of fluoridating public water supplies.⁹

Is water fluoridation cost effective?

Studies overwhelmingly show that water fluoridation is cost effective. An Australian study conducted in 2012 indicated that water fluoridation resulted in cost savings – for every \$1 spent on fluoridation, \$7–\$18 was saved in avoided treatment costs.¹

Endorsement of water fluoridation

As early as the 1950s, reputable scientific, health and health-related professional organisations throughout the world recognised the importance of water fluoridation due to the oral health and economic benefits that resulted. These organisations have repeatedly endorsed fluoridation of drinking water as a desirable public health policy-based on numerous scientific studies carried out throughout the world.

In Australia this includes:

- NHMRC
- Australian Dental Association
- Australian Medical Association
- Public Health Association of Australia
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- The Royal Flying Doctor Service
- Australian Academy of Science
- Australian Centre for Human Health Risk Assessment
- Osteoporosis Australia
- Arthritis Australia
- Kidney Health Australia
- Australasian Academy of Paediatric Dentistry
- National Rural Health Alliance

Internationally this includes:

- World Health Organization
- United States Public Health Service
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US)
- International Association of Dental Research
- FDI World Dental Federation
- Royal College of Surgeons (UK)
- Royal College of Physicians (UK)
- American Academy of Paediatrics

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