



FAQs: COMMUNITY WATER FLUORIDATION 2017



What is Community Water Fluoridation?

Fluoride is a mineral that exists naturally in virtually all water supplies, but usually at a concentration that is too low to prevent tooth decay. Many communities in Canada adjust the amount of fluoride in their community water source to maintain it at an optimal level. Many of Canada's urban centres have benefitted from community water fluoridation for over 70 years! This means we have 70 years of evidence showing that community water fluoridation is a safe and effective way to reduce dental decay for all residents of a community, regardless of age, income, dental insurance status, etc. Leading national and international health experts, including the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, all strongly support water fluoridation.

How does it work?

Fluoridated water helps to protect teeth in two ways. First, during children's tooth-forming years, the fluoride helps to strengthen the enamel of the developing teeth, making them more resistant to decay. Second, for Canadians of all ages, the fluoride in tap water mixes with saliva to help counteract acid attacks in the mouth caused by sugar and bacteria. These acid attacks are responsible for tooth decay.

But I use toothpaste every day. Isn't that enough?

When it comes to protecting our teeth, we need both toothpaste and fluoridated water to help prevent cavities. Community water fluoridation helps to strengthen teeth during development—something that toothpaste is unable to do. As a result, teeth are more resistant to acid attacks from bacteria and sugar in the mouth.

Your oral health affects your overall health, self-confidence, and quality of life. While many of us may enjoy the benefits of good oral health, dental decay is still a significant problem for many Canadians. Tooth decay is one of the single most common chronic disease among children—even more common than asthma. Children with tooth decay are often in pain, cannot eat properly, and are at a significant educational disadvantage. Dental problems can lead to frequent absences from school and lost parental working days. Each year, an estimated 19,000 day surgery operations are performed to treat cavities among children younger than age 6.

Is Fluoride Safe?

Canada has 70 years of evidence and experience demonstrating that community water fluoridation is a safe and effective way to reduce dental decay for all residents of a community, regardless of age, income, and access to dental insurance. Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada continue to review the best evidence and consider all sources of fluoride available to Canadians when making national recommendations for optimal fluoride concentration levels in public water supplies. The current recommended levels are lower than they were in the past because sources of topical fluoride, such as toothpaste, are now more readily available.

Despite the perpetuation of myths about fluoride from a small yet highly vocal group, it is clear that water fluoridation is a safe and critical nutrient for strong, healthy teeth. Leading national and international health experts agree on this point.

When it comes to community water fluoridation, the science is solid. It remains a safe, effective, and equitable way of reducing tooth decay!



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What is Fluorosis?

Fluorosis is a change in the appearance of tooth enamel. It does not affect the health or function of the teeth. Typically, fluorosis in Canada is a mild cosmetic condition that leaves faint white streaks on the surface of teeth. Many people with fluorosis don't notice it because the effect is very subtle. With the fluoride concentration levels in some parts of Canada, the likeliest adverse effect of community water fluoridation is an increased risk of mild dental fluorosis.

Is community water fluoridation costly for my community?

It is costly for your community *not* to have community water fluoridation!

Every year there are over 60,000 visits to the hospital emergency room for oral health problems in Ontario alone; this translates to an estimated cost of at least \$31 million for the province, which doesn't even account for the thousands of visits to physicians' office for similar symptoms. This situation is particularly concerning because most oral health problems can be prevented!

Water fluoridation helps to reduce the cost of dental care.

It is estimated that, for every \$1 invested in community water fluoridation, \$38 is saved from dental treatment costs by reducing the need for fillings and other costly dental procedures.

Also, research suggests that fluoride exposure improves labour market outcome later in life.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cost savings of community water fluoridation [web page]. Atlanta, GA: CDC; 2013 [cited 2017 Jan 06]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/factsheets/cost.htm>.

Numerous municipal and local governments have had to face challenging discussions on community water fluoridation, often taking months, if not years, to work through. These debates have put considerable strain on staff resources, which could be better spent on practices that protect the health and well-being of the community. While many communities have been successful in initiating or continuing water fluoridation, others have discontinued the practice or not initiated it at all. The lack of fluoridation in these communities is concerning because of the high cost and negative consequences associated with dental disease.

But shouldn't I get to choose?

The water supply belongs to the community. We're all members of a community, and we can play a significant role in helping to protect those in our community who are at highest risk for tooth decay. One person's preference should not deprive the whole community of a proven form of prevention. Nearly 70 years of research and practice prove that fluoridation is a safe and effective choice for reducing tooth decay. All Canadians should have access to this critical public health measure.