

US says too much fluoride in water

7 January 2011, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer



FILE - In this June 3, 2008 file photo, Liberty Valley Elementary School, Danville, Pa., kindergarten student Tianna Swisher attempts to drink from the water fountain at Montour Preserve, near Washingtonville, Pa., during the school's outdoor field trip. Fluoride in drinking water, credited with dramatically cutting cavities and tooth decay, may now be too much of a good thing. It's causing spots on some kids' teeth. A reported increase in the spotting problem is one reason the federal government will announce Friday, Jan. 7, 2011, it plans to lower the recommended limit for fluoride in water supplies, the first such change in nearly 50 years. (AP Photo/Bloomsburg Press Enterprise, Bill Hughes, File)

(AP) -- Fluoride in drinking water - credited with dramatically cutting cavities and tooth decay - may now be too much of a good thing. It's causing spots on some kids' teeth.

A reported increase in the spotting problem is one reason the federal government will announce Friday it plans to lower the recommended limit for fluoride in [water](#) supplies - the first such change in nearly 50 years.

About 2 out of 5 adolescents have tooth streaking or spottiness because of too much fluoride, a surprising government study found recently. In some extreme cases, teeth can even be pitted by the mineral - though many cases are so mild only dentists notice it.

Health officials note that most communities have fluoride in their water supplies, and toothpaste has it too. Some kids are even given fluoride supplements.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is announcing a proposal to change the recommended fluoride level to 0.7 milligrams per liter of water. And the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) will review whether the maximum cutoff of 4 milligrams per liter is too high.

The standard since 1962 has been a range of 0.7 to 1.2 milligrams per liter.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that the splotchy tooth condition, fluorosis, is unexpectedly common in kids ages 12 through 15. And it appears to have grown much more common since the 1980s.

"One of the things that we're most concerned about is exactly that," said an administration official who was not authorized to speak publicly before the release of the report. The official described the government's plans in an interview with The Associated Press.

The government also is expected to release two related EPA studies which look at the ways Americans are exposed to fluoride and the potential [health effects](#). This shift away from government's long-standing praise of the benefits of fluoride is sure to re-energize groups that still oppose it.

Fluoride is a mineral that exists naturally in water and soil. Scientists in the early 1940s discovered that people who lived where water supplies naturally had more fluoride also had fewer cavities. Some locales have naturally occurring fluoridation levels above 1.2.

Today, most public drinking [water supplies](#) are fluoridated, especially in larger cities. Counting everyone, including those who live in rural areas, about 64 percent of Americans drink fluoridated

water.

Fluoridation has been fought for decades by people who worried about its effects, including conspiracy theorists who feared it was a plot to make people submissive to government power.

Maryland is the most fluoridated state, with nearly every resident on a fluoridated water system. In contrast, only about 11 percent of Hawaii residents are on fluoridated water, according to government statistics.

Drinking water patterns have changed over the years, so that some stark regional differences in fluoride consumption are leveling out. There was initially a range in recommended levels because people in hotter climates drank more water. But with air conditioning and sodas, Americans in the South and Southwest don't necessarily consume more water than those in colder states, said one senior administration official.

Fluorosis is considered the main downside related to fluoridation.

According to the CDC, nearly 23 percent of children ages 12-15 had fluorosis in a study done in 1986 and 1987. That rose to 41 percent in the more recent study, which covered the years 1999 through 2004.

"We're not necessarily surprised to see this slow rise in mild fluorosis," Dr. William Kohn, director of the CDC's division of oral health, said in a recent interview.

Health officials have hesitated to call it a problem, however. In most kids, it's barely noticeable; even dentists have trouble seeing it, and sometimes don't bother to tell their unknowing patients. Except in the most severe cases, [health officials](#) considered the discoloring of fluorosis to be a welcome trade-off for the protection fluoride provides against cavities.

"One of water fluoridation's biggest advantages is that it benefits all residents of a community - at home, work, school, or play. And fluoridation's effectiveness in preventing [tooth decay](#) is not

limited to children, but extends throughout life, resulting in improved oral health," said HHS Assistant Secretary for Health Dr. Howard Koh, in a statement.

Indeed, many health leaders continue to be worried about cavities, particularly among poor families with kids who eat a lot of sweets but don't get much dental care. The American Public Health Association in November adopted a resolution calling for coordinated programs to be established at public health, dental and medical clinics to offer [fluoride](#) varnish - a highly concentrated lacquer painted on teeth to prevent cavities.

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius could make a final decision within a few months, the administration official said.

More information: CDC on fluoridation: <http://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/>

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APA citation: US says too much fluoride in water (2011, January 7) retrieved 19 September 2020 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-01-fluoride.html>

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