



Water Fluoridation

New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine Policy Statement

Policy statement

The New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (NZCPHM) endorses community water fluoridation as an important public health measure in the maintenance of oral health, the prevention of tooth decay and the reduction of health inequalities.

Background

Community water fluoridation helps prevent tooth decay and reduces inequalities in oral health. Tooth decay is a common condition in New Zealand causing pain, infection, loss of teeth and loss of self-esteem. Oral pain can stop a person from eating, working, and sleeping. Tooth decay poses extra risks for people with specific health problems – for example, heart murmurs, recent cardiac surgery, renal disease, bleeding disorders, and low immunity.

The benefits of community water fluoridation are most pronounced for those at risk of poor oral health. In New Zealand, Māori and Pacific people and people living in more deprived areas experience poorer oral health outcomes compared to other New Zealanders².

The mineral fluoride occurs naturally in water supplies in New Zealand but mostly at levels too low to provide protection against tooth decay. Community water fluoridation allows for the adjustment of fluoride levels in a public water supply to a level where protection against tooth decay can occur. The New Zealand Ministry of Health recommends that the level of fluoride in water be adjusted to between 0.7 and 1.0 parts per million (ppm)¹. Community water fluoridation programmes have been running in countries with low natural amounts of fluoride in drinking water supplies for over fifty years. There is consistent evidence of the effectiveness and safety³ of these programmes in assisting in the maintenance of oral health of these communities, regardless of social, economic or cultural group, when present in drinking-water at this level.

In conjunction with toothbrushing with fluoride toothpaste (as brushing helps to remove the bacteria found in plaque and keeps gums healthy), community water fluoridation ensures additional benefits for community oral health above that of fluoridation or brushing on its own⁴. A healthy, low sugar diet and regular dental check ups also contribute to good oral health.

Community water fluoridation is supported by a number of national and international organisations including:

- The New Zealand Ministry of Health¹
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians⁵
- The New Zealand Dental Association⁶
- New Zealand Royal Society⁷
- Public Health Association Australia⁸
- World Health Organization⁹

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services¹⁰
- FDI World Dental Federation¹¹
- American Dental Association¹²

Community water fluoridation is a population-wide approach affecting the whole population served by a particular water supply. There is an ethical argument to support community water fluoridation as the most effective approach to prevent tooth decay and reduce oral health inequalities. Population-wide approaches raise other ethical issues such as consent, as it is difficult (but possible) to 'opt-off' for those who do not wish to receive fluoridated water¹³. The NZCPHM considers that the benefits of community water fluoridation outweigh these concerns.

Links with other NZCPHM policies

Health Equity

Māori Health

First 1000 days of life

References and further information

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