

BOTTLED WATER WORRIES

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I heard recently that bottled water causes cavities and can be unsafe in general. Please write about this. H.T.

Bottled water does not cause cavities. A recent article released from Canada, and noted in our local dental society newsletter, indicated that there has been a rise in the number of cavities related to the decreased consumption of fluoridated tap water, and increased consumption of non-fluoridated bottled water. Areas where fluoride was added to the municipal water system had previously shown a substantial decrease in cavities.

Fluoride is a naturally occurring ion that has been found to harden teeth, making them less prone to getting a cavity. It was noted many years ago that people had fewer cavities if they lived in areas where the water had naturally occurring fluoride. It was also noted in these areas that there were fewer bone fractures seen in the emergency rooms. About sixty years ago small amounts of fluoride were first added to the water supply in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since then, many municipal water systems have added a very small amount to help reduce decay, with dramatic results. In 1999, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) put fluoride among the "Top 10" public health achievements of the 20th Century. The CDC found that adding fluoride to the water decreased cavities almost 30%.

Each year more cities approve of the addition of small amounts of fluoride (0.7 to 1.2 parts per million) to their water system, which provides a real gift of good oral health for the residents. For years there have been scare tactics used to limit the use of fluoride. The American Dental Association, CDC, your dentist, and World Health Organization (WHO) promote things that improve health. Fluoride benefits have been studied for many years, worldwide, using a greater number of participants than any other study.

Similar to most things we consume, the proper amount is important. Too much vitamin A, C, or E, or Aspirin, Tylenol, wine, food, and even too much water can harm you. Fluoride in the proper concentrations is beneficial for teeth and reduces dental health costs, traumatic dental visits, and helps keep the process of eating more natural and enjoyable. A nice smile, speech, and chewing function can be maintained with good oral health care habits and stronger teeth. For many people that cannot, or do not brush and floss as they should each day, or see a dentist regularly, the use of fluoride can help reduce dental problems and expenses.

Sugary snack foods, soft drinks, acidic drinks, candy, and lack of parental supervision of food intake (due to more working couples), poor oral hygiene, can all lead to more cavities. Fluoridated water has helped reduce the number of cavities despite harmful types of food until the global preference for bottled water occurred. In 2004, Americans drank nearly 6.8 billion gallons of bottled water, equaling almost 24 gallons per person nationwide; an almost 7% increase from 2003.

I recommend if you and your family drink bottled water, consume one that contains some fluoride; about 20 out of 80 bottlers include fluoride. For more information on bottled water safety go to the Natural Resources Defense Council website <http://www.nrdc.org/water/drinking/bw/bwinx.asp> Ask your dentist about the benefits of fluoride, the different types and ways to use it, and what may work best for you. Fluoride can help people of all ages.