

Community water fluoridation

Only around half of all New Zealanders receive fluoridated drinking water. Until now, it's been up to local authorities (councils) to make decisions around fluoridating their water supplies. The Director-General of Health now has the authority to decide if community drinking water supplies should be fluoridated.

What is water fluoridation?

Fluoride already exists in water. Water fluoridation is when the natural level of fluoride in the water supply is topped up to between 0.7 ppm and 1.0 ppm. This is the ideal amount for giving protection against tooth decay. This is recommended by many national and international health bodies, including the World Health Organization.

The Ministry of Health recommends water fluoridation as a safe and effective way to prevent and reduce tooth decay for everyone. The levels of fluoride in water are carefully monitored.

Is it safe?

The role of fluoride in water has been examined around the world – including in New Zealand – over the last 60 years. There is strong evidence that there are no adverse effects of any significance from fluoridation at the levels used in New Zealand, and that it is beneficial to New Zealanders of all ages. This is especially true for our most vulnerable communities

Is it effective?

Fluoride in water like a constant repair kit. It neutralises the effect of acids that cause decay and helps to repair damage before it becomes permanent.

The most recent New Zealand Oral Health Survey (2009) shows that children and adolescents have 40 percent less tooth decay over their lifetime if they live in areas with fluoridated water.

The government estimates that introducing community water fluoridation to all public drinking water supplies would result in net savings of more than \$600 million over 20 years - mostly to consumers, and some to government?

How will decisions about community water fluoridation be made?

The new legislation allows the Director-General to make decisions about fluoridating public water supplies only. They cannot direct the fluoridation of privately-owned water supplies.

Before issuing a direction to fluoridate a water supply, the Director-General must invite the affected local authority to give information in writing on the estimated cost and timing for introducing fluoridation.

The new legislation requires the Director-General of Health to consider the scientific evidence of the effectiveness of fluoridation in reducing dental decay, and whether the benefits outweigh the financial costs. They must consider the oral health status (or likely oral health status) of the local community, the size of the water supply and how much it's likely to cost to introduce fluoridation.

The Director-General of Health is required under the new legislation to seek advice from the Director of Public Health before issuing a direction. They may also consider other factors or

views. The new legislation does not require local authorities to consult with their communities on decisions around fluoridating their water supplies.

Local authorities that are currently fluoridating drinking water supplies must continue to do so.

When will the Director-General of Health start issuing directions?

We expect the Director-General of Health could start issuing directions regarding some community water supplies from mid-2022. It is expected that implementation will be phased over time. The Ministry will be engaging further with local authorities about implementation in late 2021 and early 2022.

The Director-General of Health will ensure when providing a date by which the local authority must comply with a direction, that it is reasonably practical. In instances of non-compliance, the Director-General of Health may take action to hold local authorities to account. See sections 116I and 116J of the new legislation for more information.

Do local authorities need to wait for a direction to start fluoridating?

No. Local authorities may wish to consider whether to fluoridate water supplies in the absence of the Director-General of Health issuing directions.

Who will pay for fluoridation?

Some funding will be available to support local authorities with the capital costs of fluoridation. The operational costs of fluoridation will remain with local authorities.

Who will ensure my water is safe to drink?

Local authorities and water suppliers will still be responsible for providing safe drinking water to their communities and need to meet water safety regulations. Water suppliers are required to meet the Drinking water standards for New Zealand, which set maximum acceptable values for a range of substances and organisms, including for fluoride.

How does the new legislation support equity?

Some communities and population groups in Aotearoa have worse oral health outcomes than others. New Zealand still has high rates of preventable tooth decay, particularly among Māori and Pacific children and adults, and those in vulnerable communities.

The benefits of community water fluoridation are broadly spread, but are greater for Māori, Pacific and those living in deprived communities.

Extending community water fluoridation aligns with the Treaty of Waitangi principles of equity and active protection. Te Ao Mārama (the Māori Dental Association) and the Pasifika Dental Association support community water fluoridation.

Find out more

www.fluoridefacts.govt.nz | www.health.govt.nz/water-fluoridation