

Fluoride is a subject that has made the news headlines recently. We all know that it has got something to do with our teeth, but do many of us know the reasoning behind the arguments?

What is fluoride?

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral. It may be found naturally in water supplies in some parts of the world, but is not found in any great quantity in the UK

It is also added to most toothpastes, some mouthwashes, and in some countries, to salt, although again, this does not happen in the UK. Fluoride tablets are available on prescription for those especially at risk from tooth decay.

What good does it do?

The reason that fluoride is added to toothpastes is because it helps protect teeth against decay. When teeth are developing in the jaws, which occurs from even before a baby is born; the body will put any fluoride it finds into the teeth, which makes them stronger when they come through. It also slows down decay, and in some cases, may stop it altogether. Some scientists also claim that it makes bones stronger too.

Can it do any harm?

As with many medicines, care must be taken when using fluoride supplements. If too much fluoride is taken, white or yellow patches can appear on the teeth.

Is there fluoride in our water supply?

At present, no. If fluoride is added to the water supply, the Local Authority can be sure it is reaching everyone, including people who can't or don't use fluoride toothpaste, or very young children (and pets!). Because we drink so much tap water during an average day (e.g. we boil food in it, drink it, brush our teeth with it), the amount of fluoride in the water can be kept very small. You would have to drink a whole swimming pool full of fluoridated water in one day to get too much. This is why most dentists would like to see it put in the water supply.

In the North West, we don't have fluoride in the water supply. As a result, children here have the highest rate of dental decay anywhere in England. Dentists can prescribe fluoride tablets, but this is not ideal as having it in the water, because small children could take too many tablets by accident. It also means that you have to see a dentist to get them.

Why isn't it in our water?

Many places, like Birmingham and Newcastle upon Tyne, do have it. In Newcastle, tooth decay has more than halved since the fluoride was added and now boast one of the lowest levels of tooth decay in the country. In the North West, the Local Authority has not really decided one way or another, but a lot of people don't want fluoride added. They are worried an accident could lead to too much being added. Also, although it is not very expensive, adding fluoride to water is of course more expensive than not adding it. For a little cost at the Water Board, though, thousands of people could be saved a lot of pain.



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A tale of two teams?

The following article was taken from a publication from the British Dental Association. Our thanks to them for allowing us to use it.

Imagine that West Bromwich Albion and Blackburn Rovers were to be drawn against each other in this year's FA Cup.

An interesting clash, with one of this season's leading teams from the first division against an elite premier league side that won the championship only a few years ago.

Pools forecast? Possibly a draw at The Hawthorns and a replay at Ewood Park. That's football. But in dental matters there is absolutely no contest. Sandwell (the socially deprived Black Country district where West Brom play) is now one of the best districts in the country for children's teeth. Blackburn, by contrast is languishing near the bottom of the UK health league.

The average 5-year old in Blackburn has 270% more teeth decayed, missing or filled than the average 5-year old in Sandwell.

The difference cannot be explained in terms of social deprivation. In fact, according to one major index (the Jarman score) used by health authorities to measure relative social deprivation, Blackburn is better off than Sandwell. So, all other things being equal, Blackburn children might be expected to have better teeth than Sandwell children.

However, it is very much the other way round.

Why? Well, it is because the borough of Sandwell has received fluoridated water supplies since 1986.

Looking at the history of children's dental health in Blackburn over the past ten years, we find that there has been no improvement.

By contrast, Sandwell's dental health has been getting better and better. In fact, it has improved nearly threefold since the year before its water was first fluoridated.

And, during this time, Sandwell has moved spectacularly up the UK dental health league table. From being 136th in 1985, it is now 24th out of 208. Blackburn was 142nd in 1985 and has now dropped to 175th.

Without doubt, Blackburn would go shooting up the dental health league table within five years if its water were fluoridated like Sandwell's.

Generally speaking, tooth decay is halved by fluoridation. Should Blackburn children and millions like them in other places with bad dental health, be left to languish at the bottom of the league for ever?

If reducing health inequalities means anything at all, it means getting to grips with this issue - not in a few years' time, but right now.

Who wants water to be fluoridated?

Most dentists, many doctors and some patients want fluoride to be added. In addition, the following organizations support fluoridation :

- British Dental Association
- British Medical Association
- British Fluoridation Society
- NHS Confederation
- Association of Directors of Public Health Medicine
- Association for Public Health
- British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry
- British Dental Health Foundation
- British Dental Hygienists Association
- British Society of Dentistry for the Handicapped
- British Society of Gerodontology
- British Society of Paediatric Dentistry
- Faculty of General Practitioners (UK) of the Royal College of Surgeons of England
- Department of Clinical Dental Sciences, School of Dentistry
- Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians of the United Kingdom
- FDI World Dental Federation
- Health Education Authority
- Health Promotion Wales
- Help the Aged
- Institute of Health Education
- MENCAP
- National Dental Health Education Group
- NHS Consultants Association
- Oral Health Promotion Research Group
- Public Health Alliance
- Scottish Association for Community Child Health
- Socialist Health Association
- The Patients Association
- The Royal Society of Health
- Unison Health Care