



# Feature Column

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## **Keeping Your Hometown Healthy**

**Optimum Health for All Arkansans – Community Water Fluoridation      July 28 – August 3, 2002**

Arkansas suffers from a true crisis in oral health. Recent surveys conducted by our Office of Oral Health continue to show that Arkansas children, adults and the elderly have a higher level of oral disease than the rest of the nation. The majority of children have cavities; 40 percent of the children have untreated tooth decay; and almost 10 percent of our children have emergency dental treatment needs. One-fifth of all Arkansans over age 18 have lost all their natural teeth and an alarming 53 percent of those older than 65 have no natural teeth. Our efforts in primary prevention of oral disease must be expanded to meet this challenge. Oral health has a direct impact on our overall health. Poor oral health can contribute to diabetes and cardiovascular disease and even cause pre-term, low birth-weight babies.

The combination of dental sealants (plastic coatings applied to the biting surface of back teeth) and community water fluoridation can prevent virtually all tooth decay. However, state surveys show that only 23 percent of third grade children in Arkansas have dental sealants. Less than 2 percent of children of poverty have one dental sealant.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) heralded fluoridation as one of the greatest public health accomplishments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since its inception in 1945, fluoridation use has

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expanded to protect more than 160 million Americans, including the 1.4 million Arkansans who enjoy the benefits of drinking fluoridated water. Although water fluoridation has long been proven as the safest, most effective and most economical method for preventing tooth decay, not all community water supplies are fluoridated.

Fluoridation prevents from 40-60 percent of cavities. It costs less than 50 cents per person per year and each dollar spent on fluoridation prevents up to \$80 in dental treatment. A lifetime of fluoridation costs less than one dental filling. Unfortunately, only 60 percent of Arkansans receive these benefits.

All water supplies have some fluoride. Some supplies in Arkansas and elsewhere contain sufficient natural fluoride to prevent cavities. For those supplies deficient in natural fluoride, fluoridation is the adjustment of the natural level to that level known to prevent tooth decay. Fluoridation is practical in communities or water districts of more than 1,000 residents served by a central water system.

Families served by wells or springs do not benefit from fluoridation. For those families, dentists and physicians often prescribe fluoride supplements for children in the family. Fluoride supplementation is based on the background level of fluoride in the drinking water and the child's age. In June of this year, the Arkansas Health Department provided every dentist, pediatrician and family practice physician in the state information on proper fluoride supplementation.

The Arkansas Department of Health endorses water fluoridation to benefit the oral health of Arkansans. Through federal grant funds, the department helps communities purchase fluoridation equipment and provides training and technical assistance. Our Office of Oral Health works with community leaders to provide information on fluoridation and to assist communities to obtain federal support. The communities' investment in better oral health is only the cost of the fluoride itself – a

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minor cost for a major benefit.

If your community is fluoridated, you enjoy a higher quality of life than people did just 50 years ago. To find out if your community is fluoridated, contact your local water district or your local health unit. For information on how to implement this important public health measure for your community, contact the Office of Oral Health at 1-800-482-5400 ext. 2595.

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