

The facts about bottled water

The human body is made up mostly of water and depends on water to keep organs and systems functioning properly. Water regulates body temperature, helps remove waste, cushions the joints and transports nutrients and oxygen to billions of cells. Increasing water intake sometimes can help alleviate a condition called dry mouth, or xerostomia. And water that contains an adequate amount of fluoride helps prevent tooth decay and builds strong teeth.

Health experts generally recommend consuming eight to 10 cups of water a day. The amount may vary based on body size, physical activity and exposure to hot weather.

More health-conscious consumers are sipping bottled water. Some even forgo fluoridated tap water in their homes for costly bottled water. A recent study shows that Americans consumed more than 5 billion gallons of bottled water in 2000, more than double the amount from a decade earlier. Some predict that bottled water soon may become the nation's second most popular beverage after soft drinks.

If bottled water is your main source of drinking water, you could be missing the decay-preventive benefits of fluoride, a naturally occurring mineral that helps prevent tooth decay.

Water fluoridation is a community health measure that is recognized widely for its role in preventing tooth decay. In areas where natural fluoride occurs in water below the optimal level, many communities add a minute amount of fluoride to the water supply to make certain that residents receive the benefits of fluoride.

While the fluoride content of bottled water varies greatly, the vast majority of bottled waters do not contain optimal levels of fluoride. Some

contain no fluoride. When water is treated before it is bottled, fluoride may be lost. For example, many popular brands of bottled water undergo reverse osmosis or distillation. These treatments remove all of the fluoride from the water.

How can you make sure you and your family—especially children—are getting the right amount of fluoride protection in bottled water? Check the label for fluoride content. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's current regulations do not require bottled water companies to indicate fluoride content on bottled water labels, unless it has been added to the water.

Contact the company if the fluoride content is not shown on the label and ask what level of fluoride the water contains. Amounts of fluoride are the same whether they are reported in parts per million or milligrams per liter. To help prevent tooth decay, water should contain 0.7 to 1.2 ppm of fluoride. One ppm is equal to 1 mg/L. Consider:

- How much bottled water do you (or family members) consume each day?
- Is bottled water also used for meal preparation and added to canned or powdered soups, juices and other drinks?
- Is another source of drinking water used during the day, such as an optimally fluoridated community water supply at day care, school or work?

Don't overlook your home water treatment systems, such as reverse osmosis and distillation units, which may remove the fluoride from water supplies. It's a good idea to look at the manual for these devices or to contact the manufacturer if you can't determine their effect on fluoride levels. ■

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