

Understanding Community Water Fluoridation (CWF): State and Federal Roles - Frequently Asked Questions

This document was prepared by the State Board of Health policy staff as a plain-language educational resource for Board Members and the general public. It is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice.

What is fluoride?

Fluoride is a mineral found naturally in the environment, including in soil, rocks, and water. It can also be added to everyday products like toothpaste, mouthwash, and drinking water. Fluoride is commonly used to help prevent cavities and tooth decay.

What is community water fluoridation (CWF)?

CWF is a public health practice used in many communities across the U.S. It involves adjusting the amount of fluoride in public drinking water to a level that helps reduce tooth decay. Some water systems naturally have fluoride; others may choose to add it.

Who decides whether to start or stop CWF?

In the U.S., the decision to fluoridate public water systems is made at the state or local level.

In Washington State, the decision to fluoridate drinking water is made at the local level by each public water system or local government.

If a community decides to add fluoride, it must follow the rules set by the Washington State Board of Health (or “Board”). The Washington State Department of Health is responsible for enforcing these rules through its Drinking Water Program.

What is the role of the State Board of Health in CWF?

State law (RCW 43.20.050) requires the Board to set health and safety standards for public water systems to ensure safe and reliable drinking water.

Does the Board of Health require CWF?

No. The Washington State Board of Health does not require or ban water fluoridation. It is up to each public water system or local government to decide whether to fluoridate.

The Board has set an optimal fluoride concentration level of 0.7 milligrams per liter (mg/L) in state rule (WAC 246-290-460). This rule applies to large (Group A) public water systems that choose to fluoridate.

What role does the federal government play in CWF?

The federal government sets national safety standards for fluoride in drinking water under the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (SDWA) through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Two federal agencies are mainly involved in CWF: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the United States Public Health Service (USPHS).

The federal government does not require communities to add or remove fluoride from drinking water if levels stay below the EPA's limit of 4.0 milligrams per liter (mg/L). This limit is also called the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL).

The USPHS recommends a fluoridation level of 0.7 mg/L for water systems that choose to fluoridate.

Communities have made decisions about fluoridation since 1945, when Grand Rapids, Michigan, became the first U.S. city to fluoridate its water.

Other federal agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), regulate fluoride when it is added to consumer products like toothpaste, mouthwash, and dietary supplements.

Which federal agencies are involved in CWF and what do they do?

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- Regulates fluoride levels in public drinking water under the Safe Drinking Water Act.
- Sets the enforceable safety limit at 4.0 mg/L to protect against health effects from too much fluoride, whether naturally occurring or added in excess of the optimal level.
- Focuses on the level of fluoride that presents a health risk.

U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS)

- Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), USPHS includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR).
- Recommends the optimal fluoride level in drinking water (0.7 mg/L) to help prevent tooth decay while minimizing health risks.
- Provides scientific guidance to support state and local public health decisions.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

- Part of HHS that works to ensure the safety and effectiveness of medicines, vaccines, medical devices, and other health-related products. They also oversee the safety of some food, cosmetics, dietary supplements, and more.
- Responsible for making sure fluoride is safe and effective when used in consumer products. This includes toothpaste, mouthwash, fluoride supplements, and other over-the-counter dental products.
- Sets standards for how consumer products are labeled and ensures they meet safety and quality requirements before they are sold to the public.
- Does not regulate fluoride levels in public drinking water.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- Oversees farming, food safety, and nutrition programs.
- Collects and shares data on fluoride levels in food and beverages.
- Supports nutrition and public health guidance that considers fluoride intake from dietary sources.
- Does not regulate fluoride levels in public drinking water or consumer products.

Why is there recent increased attention on CWF and fluoride?

There is growing national attention on fluoridation due to:

- New scientific studies
- A recent federal court ruling
- Ongoing discussions at the federal level

What's happening at the federal level regarding CWF or fluoride?

In April 2025, the EPA announced it would review new scientific data on fluoride health risks, following a court order. This ruling did not ban fluoride or require any immediate changes. As of August 2025, the EPA has not taken formal action or provided updates on this work.

In May 2025, the FDA announced it is beginning the process to possibly remove ingestible fluoride prescription drug products for children from the market. The FDA plans to finish a safety review and collect public feedback by October 31, 2025.

Is anything changing in Washington State regarding CWF?

No. CWF remains a local decision. The Board will continue monitoring federal developments in collaboration with the Department of Health. The Board will also:

- Receive updates on the latest science and evidence from the Department of Health's Fluoride Science Review Panel.
- Provide updates as new information becomes available.

To request this document in an alternate format or a different language, please contact the Washington State Board of Health at 360-236-4110 or by email at wsboh@sboh.wa.gov. TTY users can dial 711.

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