

SAY THIS, NOT THAT:

Tips for talking about Community Water Fluoridation

Many people take for granted that community water fluoridation (CWF) in the US is a safe and well-accepted public health practice, but CWF is surprisingly controversial.

As a health professional, it is natural to use technical language. But when talking about water fluoridation, it is important to use words and phrases that don't add to confusion or fear.

These tips are intended to prepare you to have comfortable, productive conversations with patients using "kitchen table" language to address their concerns and inoculate them against common distortions about fluoride safety.

SAY THIS:



Fluoride is a proven way to strengthen teeth for people of all ages.

Fluoride opponents use fear and doubt to gain support. Rather than addressing such tactics, focus on the scientifically proven benefits of water fluoridation: stronger teeth lead to better overall health which means that children and adults don't suffer the pain and expense of treatment and get to keep their teeth for a lifetime.



Fluoride occurs naturally in all water.

While scientifically correct, the word "chemical" can have a negative connotation. Point out that fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral found in almost all water supplies. We adjust the level to the right amount to prevent tooth decay.



I understand your concerns. I had the same ones until I looked into the issue.

Acknowledging your patients' concerns gives you an opportunity to share sound information. It is important to be attentive and to avoid using conversation-stoppers. This phrase can be used at any point in the conversation when concerns are raised.



There is a lot of misinformation about fluoride. Based on what you've seen, is there a specific concern you'd like to discuss?

The best way to address concerns, and to inoculate people against misinformation about fluoride, is to engage them in conversation, keeping it open and flowing.

NOT THAT:



Potential harm from fluoride has been greatly distorted.



Fluoride is a chemical added to water.



There is nothing to worry about.



Don't trust everything you read on the internet.

Fluoride has been falsely associated with a wide variety of health concerns, and you may be asked to address some of them. The column on the left provides suggestions to promote open-ended conversations.

CONCERN: FLUOROSIS



Dental fluorosis is a change in the appearance of the surface of the tooth. It doesn't hurt and it doesn't harm your health. In fact, it means teeth are strong. Let's talk about how to prevent it. I even have some information you can take with you. (See *Fluorosis Facts for Parents and Caregivers*.)



Very few people develop severe fluorosis.

The most common occurrences of fluorosis are “very mild” or “mild”. Share the handout on Fluorosis, and take time to explain occurrence and prevention to parents and caregivers.

CONCERN: INFANT FORMULA



It is perfectly safe to mix infant formula with fluoridated water, although it may increase the possibility of developing fluorosis in the permanent teeth of children who are fed only formula as babies.



The risk of preparing formula with fluoridated water is that it may increase the chance of developing fluorosis in the permanent teeth.

Avoid using the word “risk.” It is difficult to qualify in a brief encounter and may be the one word that the parent or caregiver remembers. Most fluorosis is very mild/mild. Less than 2% is moderate, and less than 1% is severe. For more information, see the Fluorosis Facts for Health Professionals and share the Fluorosis Facts for Parents and Caregivers handout and emphasize alternating tap and properly labeled bottled water, as needed.

CONCERN: CANCER



The American Cancer Society, which tracks the research on things that may cause cancer, has found no connection between fluoride and cancer. I know that if it caused cancer, they would be the first to alert not only the medical community, but everyone.” (See *Fluoride Safety Tool*)



Fluoride is not a known carcinogen.

While the phrase on the right is accurate, it does not encourage much conversation. Reminding the listener that a reputable organization such as the American Cancer Society has found no association between fluoride and cancer gives families additional reassurance. Share the parent handout *Fluoride Safety Guide for Health Professionals*.

CONCERN: ONLY BENEFITS THE YOUNG

✓ We used to think that this was true, but over time we have learned that our teeth benefit throughout our lives from being continuously bathed in fluoride. It makes them stronger.

✗ Actually, it works throughout the lifetime by incorporating into the saliva.

A more technical explanation may be needed depending on the audience, but start with a “kitchen table” approach to help everyone understand how it works.

CONCERN: BOTTLED WATER IS SAFER

✓ Community drinking water in the US is some of the safest water in the world because there are local water operators whose job it is to maintain water quality. So, there is no health benefit to buying and drinking bottled water, and tap water is cheaper, too. If families prefer the taste of bottled water, advise them to look for fluoridated bottled water.

✗ You really don't need to worry about the safety of your water.

Different backgrounds lead people to distrust tap water so information about how our water's safety is maintained needs to be addressed. Let them know that using an activated carbon water filter to adjust the taste, if necessary, is less expensive and still lets them get the benefits of fluoride.

CONCERN: COST TO TAXPAYERS

✓ The money we spend adjusting the fluoride level is saved when we don't have to pay for fillings. Some estimates actually say we save as much as \$38 for every \$1 we spend.

✗ It is actually very cost effective.

This is also a great time to share a story that demonstrates how much a cavity can cost over someone's lifetime or about the pain that is avoided when a cavity is prevented.

For additional resources and information, please visit www.ILikeMyTeeth.org.