



COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



Ensuring Oral Health with Fluoride, Screenings

Fluoride is a naturally occurring compound that helps prevent dental decay. It is present in water, as well as foods and beverages in varying amounts. For nearly 70 years, it has also been added to public water to improve oral health. This process of fluoridation has been touted as one of the top ten public health achievements of the last century, along with immunizations and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard. However, where community fluoridation is not practical, dental care and screenings offer protections for oral health.

In Putnam County, more than 80 percent of residents obtain their water from private wells. The remaining 20 percent rely on 119 non-fluoridated water supplies. While technological advances have made it possible to fluoridate systems servicing as few as five dwellings, the practice has met community resistance. Nonetheless, the scientific evidence is clear: adding fluoride to the recommended level of 0.7 to 1.2 parts per million reduces tooth decay by 20 to 40 percent. Such reductions are significant, given that one fourth of U.S. adults over 65 have lost all their teeth and dental decay is a key cause, even with widespread availability of fluoride toothpastes and mouthwashes. Dental decay is also one of the most prevalent childhood diseases and the Putnam County Department of Health partners with the Putnam County Dental Society to perform free dental screenings for fourth graders in a number of local elementary schools.

Fluoridation naysayers cite junk science, pseudo-scientific literature and conspiracy theories, but extensive support for the practice exists throughout the medical and research communities. The American Dental Association (ADA), the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the U.S. Surgeon General, the Institute of Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research, are a handful of more than 100 national and international organizations that support the practice.

If your drinking water comes from a well or community water system, the small amount of naturally occurring fluoride may not be sufficient to provide dental benefits. Check with your pediatrician or dentist about protecting your child's oral health with a fluoride supplement that avoids excessive fluoridation and enamel damage called fluorosis. A supplement may be advised up to age 16.

Dr. Allen Beals is Commissioner of the Putnam County Department of Health; his column on health issues appears monthly.