

Residents weigh in on extra fluoride: Not in my water supply

Some local residents resist extra dose of fluoride.

By JEFF OVERLEY, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Corona del Mar resident Blythe Fair has consulted Jehovah's Witnesses, practiced a Japanese form of holistic healing and armed herself with a salad spinner, all in a desperate attempt to evade her arch-nemesis – fluoride.

Concerned that the icon of dental hygiene is actually a menace to public health, Fair is among a small but resolute band of local residents going to great lengths to avoid the extra dose of fluoride added last month to about half of Orange County's water supply.

"I feel bad that there isn't a choice – there isn't a way around being poisoned," Fair said. Among many steps, Fair is practicing Jin Shin Jyutsu to support her bone health, has asked for advice from Jehovah's Witnesses, who sometimes eschew certain medical procedures, and has a salad spinner to rid lettuce of fluoridated H₂O.

Water fluoridation has conjured colorful protests since its early stages in the 1950s, when opponents famously decried it as a communist conspiracy. Anti-fluoride activists, however, bristle at suggestions they're paranoid.

"The people I have talked to and met with are not 'delusional' nor 'fringe element,' but educated, conscientious and often prominent members of our community," said Newport Beach resident Chris Sullivan, who plans to install a \$500 system that uses activated alumina to remove fluoride.

But suspicions do remain, even after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention dubbed water fluoridation one of the "10 great public health achievements of the 20th century."

"Does the (Metropolitan Water District of Southern California) expect people to believe that dentists would actually recommend a substance for healthier teeth that will pretty much decrease their business?" asked Santa Ana resident Karim Nasser.

Water district spokesman Bob Muir says that's exactly the case – medical and dental professionals requested the addition of fluoride to water in Orange County and surrounding areas.

Huntington Beach and Fountain Valley already have fluoridated water; since the newly fluoridated water will often be blended with other supplies, other county residents will encounter varying amounts of fluoride.

Even with the prospect that the increase in fluoride will be negligible, many locals aren't taking chances. Orange resident Terry Jakel installed a \$200 reverse osmosis filter to purify his water. "Government shouldn't be involved in dictating what they think is good for our health," Jakel said. "We should have a choice of what we want to consume."

Fluoridation foes have a two-pronged argument. They say the practice is pointless since fluoride absorbs best through tooth enamel, instead of being swallowed. Second, they fear health risks.

Figures from the World Health Organization, they note, show that rates of tooth decay have plummeted in past decades not only in the United States, where two-thirds of the country's population drinks fluoridated water, but also in Western Europe, where only about 2 percent of households use fluoridated water.

Public health officials have argued, according to published reports, that Western Europe has more effective preventive care.

Also, a 2002 Orange County study indicated that children in Huntington and Fountain Valley, on average, had one less missing, decayed or filled tooth than residents of cities with un-fluoridated water.

Whatever the case, opponents say fluoridation amounts to mass medication. "When are they going to start antibiotics in the water to prevent the flu?" asked Laguna Woods resident Beverly Portlock.

Research linking fluoride to bone cancer and thyroid problems, dismissed as flawed by leading medical agencies, is spotlighted by fluoride opponents as damning evidence of fluoride's dangers.

Fluoride fears are a boon for some water-purifying companies. "A week before (fluoride was added) was when the phone was just going crazy," said Cliff Christie, sales coordinator at Culligan Water of Orange County.

Chris MacKnight, president of Water By Design in Fullerton, said 10 people inquired about fluoride removal, and others with reverse-osmosis purifiers called to see if their systems removed fluoride.

Supporters and critics of fluoride agree that excessive fluoride can cause blotchy white stains on teeth. The California Department of Public Health in October advised dentists to suspend fluoride supplements for a year to "ensure that consumers do not receive more fluoride than is necessary."

For activists such as Fair, however, such steps are too meager. A onetime resident of the U.S. Virgin Islands, she's now enjoying what she calls "tropical showers" – a quick rinse, turn off the water, soap up and rinse off – to minimize fluoride contact.

"I know it sounds comical," she said, "but you have to limit exposure."

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