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Drinking Water

Recommended Fluoride Levels in Water Updated by HHS for First Time in 50 Years



By Matthew Berger

April 27 — The Department of Health and Human Services lowered the recommended concentration of fluoride in drinking water for the first time in more than 50 years.

The April 27 recommendations place the optimal concentration at 0.7 milligram per liter of water and replace the previous recommendations, which were issued in 1962 and said community water systems could contain up to 0.7 mg/L to 1.2 mg/L fluoride, depending on local temperatures.

In a related action, the Federal Drug Administration lowered its recommended levels for fluoride added to bottled water to 0.7 mg/L April 27, according to a letter manufacturers, distributors and importers of bottled water sent to the agency.

50 Years Ago

The new HHS recommendations initially were proposed in 2011, following new risk assessments that tied excessive fluoridation to the pitting of tooth enamel (06 DEN A-8, 1/10/11).

The final recommendations were expected to be issued as early as the end of 2012 (201 DEN A-14, 10/18/12).

In a statement announcing the finalized recommendations April 27, HHS said the growing availability and use of new sources of fluoride, such as toothpaste and mouth rinses, during the past five decades have led to increasing cases of the enamel pitting, known as fluorosis.

The recommendations reiterate the importance of the continued fluoridation of community water systems in preventing tooth decay, however.

The new recommendations also say the 1962 recommendations' use of a range of limits, which took into account differences in temperatures in different municipalities, is no longer necessary because of the prevalence of air conditioning and "more sedentary lifestyles" since the 1950s has rendered moot the assumption that children in warmer parts of the country necessarily drink more tap water than those in cooler parts.

Although he said he cannot speak for all states, Jim Taft, executive director of the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators, told Bloomberg BNA, "My sense is that state drinking water programs are generally comfortable with this action for the specific reasons mentioned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in their announcement." CDC conducts research on fluoride within HHS.

Several health organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dental Association, issued statements supporting the new recommendations and saying the 0.7 mg/L level provides enough fluoride to maintain tooth decay prevention goals.

The federal government does not require fluoridation and the recommendations apply only to those community water systems that are currently or will begin to fluoridate their water. Seventy-five percent of those served by public water systems in the U.S. receive fluoridated water, according to HHS.

Bottled Water

The FDA announcement lowering the recommended cap on concentrations of fluoride added to bottled water does not affect the current allowable levels of fluoride in bottled water, as set in FDA quality standards for bottled water. But the agency said April 27 that it intends to revise the standards for fluoride added to bottled water to be consistent with the HHS guidelines.

An agency spokeswoman told Bloomberg BNA that the timeline for those revisions "remains to be determined."

Currently, bottled water can contain up to 0.8 to 1.7 mg/L of added fluoride, depending on local temperatures where the bottled water is sold, and imported bottled water cannot contain more than 0.8 mg/L of added fluoride. The new recommendations follow HHS's lead in seeking a single limit of 0.7 mg/L no matter where the bottles are sold.

The recommendations do not change the limits for bottled water containing naturally occurring fluoride, which range from 1.4 to 2.4 mg/L.

Twenty-two companies make fluoridated bottled water, according to the International Bottled Water Association.

IBWA spokesman Christopher Hogan told Bloomberg BNA that the association "fully supports the new FDA recommendations on fluoride in bottled water and the FDA's plans to revise the quality standard accordingly." He said the IBWA has supported the revised recommendations since 2011 and, at that time, encouraged its member companies to adopt the lower level in their products.

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For More Information

The new community water system recommendations are available at http://www.publichealthreports.org/documents/PHS_2015_Fluoride_Guidelines.pdf.

The letter indicating the new bottled water recommendations is available at <http://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/GuidanceDocumentsRegulatoryInformation/BottledWaterCarbonatedSoftDrinks/ucm444373.htm?>

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