

Province looks into inorganic fluoride

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The province is stepping into the fluoridation debate after a local citizens group requested a review of their concerns under the Environmental Bill of Rights.

The Ministry of the Environment is launching its own review of the existing policies and regulations under the Safe Drinking Water Act that pertain to the addition of inorganic fluorides to drinking water.

Carole Clinch, the research co-ordinator for People for Safe Drinking Water, called it a historic moment when her group received the letter at the start of February. The last time the ministry reviewed fluoridation was in 1999 and it precipitated a drop in the maximum dosage of fluoride that could be added to the drinking water.

Since then, Clinch said there's been more research to show that the lower fluoride levels in drinking water have a negligible effect. The science itself is questioning whether fluoridation has an effect at all in preventing cavities in a number of peer-reviewed journals.

Worse, Clinch said, there is a concern that hydrofluorosilicic acid, an industrial byproduct which is added to Waterloo's drinking water, may have some negative health effects and contribute trace amounts of lead and arsenic to the water. The Waterloo-based peer reviewer has cut fluoridated water out of her own diet because of concerns that it has contributed to her hypothyroidism.

"In the history of water fluoridation, this is only the second time that Ministry of the Environment and Health Canada have done a review of this subject," said Clinch. "This is historically significant."

Clinch said that reported cases of mottled teeth caused by fluoride are higher than they were during the last review and that people are ingesting the substance from more external sources. They no longer need it in their drinking water.

"The occurrence of cavities hasn't really changed much, but the incidence of fluorosis has," said Clinch. "And the concentration levels that they are using now, according to the Centres for Disease Control, are too low to have a topical effect."

"So if they're too low to have a topical effect when we're drinking it, why are they still promoting it?"

In the letter of confirmation received by Clinch, the ministry acknowledges that there is a competing concern surrounding the fluoridation of drinking water, but the protection of Ontario's drinking water is paramount to the ministry and municipalities around the province.

"Anything that touches on the Safe Drinking Water Act now touches a hot button," said Clinch about the post-Walkerton realities of source-water protection. "It's pretty clear wording that dilution is no defence, and these guys are telling me we have a pretty big problem here."

Clinch is planning to continue to submit new research to the review process, and is building a team that will include legal representation and her own water experts.

Satish Deshpande, a team leader of drinking-water standards at the standard development branch at the Ministry of the Environment, said the review can take up to two years and will run parallel to one that Health Canada is already engaged in regarding the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines for Fluoride.

"Basically what we do is take the submissions made by the applicants, and it is a fairly lengthy amount of information that they've compiled," said Deshpande. "We will review that information and review it against peer-reviewed literature."

"We will also consult with experts if necessary, and I suspect that it will be."

In addition to the literature review, and expert consultation, the ministry will contact the original authors of the studies to do as thorough a job as they can.

Deshpande said if that review requires a policy change they will consult with the municipalities involved about the changes required. "We do a fairly public consultation on the (Environmental Bill of Rights) and we usually get a lot of comments from the stakeholders," he said. "And we're obligated to respond to the consultation as to how we received what was said and what we did about it."

As for concerns that the addition of hydrofluorosilicic acid already contravenes the Safe Drinking Water Act, Deshpande said it does not.

"The addition of hydrofluorosilicic acid does not contravene the Safe Drinking Water Act," he said. "So even though there might be trace amounts of other compounds in there, like arsenic and lead and whatever else there is in there, as long as those levels don't exceed the standards that we have for them, we wouldn't treat this as an exceedance in need of reporting or requiring corrective action under the Safe Drinking Water Act."

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"In the history of water fluoridation, this is only the second time that Ministry of the Environment and Health Canada have done a review of this subject," said Clinch. She said that reported cases of mottled teeth caused by fluoride are higher than they were during the last review and that people are ingesting the substance from more external sources. They no longer need it in their drinking water.

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