



MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

**PRECAUTIONS:** Workers at the Diemer water treatment plant in Yorba Linda wear eye protection when working around the fluoride compound being added to Metropolitan Water District supplies. The MWD began fluoridating water last month.

home is the only one in his neighborhood with a large sign out front that reads, "Warning. Fluoride is Not Safe for a Baby!"

Kennedy, an articulate and intelligent defender of his views, is used to being dismissed as a wacko. He couldn't care less.

"If you dare say you are against fluorosilicic acid in our water, you get labeled as a kook. That's their strategy: You denigrate the source by saying, 'This is just junk science,'" he said.

Kennedy has been at odds with his profession for years. He hasn't used toothpaste since 1984, insisting saliva contains the

nutrients needed for healthy teeth. "There is no valid scientific evidence to support the benefits of fluoride. . . . The Centers for Disease Control? They're lying."

Because fluoride easily bonds with other chemicals it has been widely used in industry, including in the manufacture of steel, glass and ceramics. More sinister, in the eyes of its critics, have been its uses in such things as rat poison and atomic bomb production.

And fluoride opponents can point to one indisputable fact: The chemical is indeed dangerous, even in small amounts. It's extremely corrosive — an accidental spill of fluorosilicic acid on a Florida interstate a few years ago sent more than 50 people to hospitals. Drinking an ounce would probably kill a person.

The amount considered optimal for teeth is minuscule by comparison. The EPA allows dozens of dangerous chemicals to be added in minute amounts to public water for a variety of reasons. Chlorine and ozone purify. Hydrochloric acid makes water less alkaline; sodium hydroxide makes it less acidic. Aluminum sulfate makes it clearer. Sodium chloride softens hard water.

What sets fluoride apart is that it is the only chemical specifically added to water as a health remedy.

"The people who are against this — they are so exercised over it," said Michael Easley, a Florida state health official who has been one of the nation's leading proponents of fluoridation for three decades. "Nobody drags anyone to a water faucet and makes them drink. Dig a well. Move out of the country."

When a panel of scientists last year reported that high fluoride levels could damage the tooth enamel of children and weaken adult bones, opponents of fluoridation cited the finding as more proof of the chemical's danger.

But the National Academies' National Research Council focused on the relatively small number of Americans who drink water with naturally occurring fluoride levels that are about four times the recommended concentration. The report didn't examine the risks or benefits of

lower-level artificially fluoridated water.

Nevertheless, the council's report prompted the American Dental Assn. to recommend that reconstituted baby formula be made with fluoride-free water to reduce the risk of enamel fluorosis, which could permanently stain developing teeth. The group continues to support fluoridation of drinking water.

That kind of scientific nuance, filtered through city council debates and voter initiatives — and now the Internet — has kept fluoride out of some water systems. Still, about 170 million Americans, about two-thirds of the population, drink from public systems with the recommended amount of fluoride.

From the start, "every city that wanted to add fluoride conducted public hearings that brought out all sorts of theories," Easley said. "If they held immunizations to the same standard — bringing it before city councils or going to the ballot box with it — I doubt the states would have programs requiring them."

California has been slow to adopt fluoride. Prior to 1995, California ranked 48th out of the 50 states in the percentage of people who drank fluoridated water. That year, Easley helped write legislation passed by the Assembly which mandates that water providers fluoridate when money becomes available to retrofit their systems. With the MWD's move and San Diego poised to add fluoride, California will soon be on par with the rest of the U.S.

In August, as the MWD prepared to begin adding fluoride, Kennedy spoke before the agency's board. He insisted they had an obligation to warn customers that their children were about to be poisoned.

He spoke about three minutes. There were no questions for him. In the weeks that followed, there was little public outcry.

Being a fluoride warrior can be a lonely business.

"I've spent more of my own money and time on this than I need to," Kennedy said. "We have as a nation become idiots staring at boob tubes. . . . Did they forget how to read? Or are their brains damaged from exposure to fluoride?"

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