

Israel to discontinue fluoridation of tap water

As health minister ends program, 5.3 million residents to lose controversial additive

By **TOI STAFF**

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Illustrative photo of a woman brushing her teeth. (photo credit: Sophie Gordon/Flash 90)

Israeli tap water will no longer contain fluoride after Tuesday, following a decree by Health Minister Yael German earlier this month discontinuing the practice.

The decision has been lauded by various rights groups, but criticized by many in the medical and dental communities as a serious mistake.

Fluoride is commonly added to national water supplies by governments throughout the world in order to prevent tooth decay, but critics say overconsumption of the invisible, odorless, tasteless gas is a health hazard.

Israel originally mandated water fluoridation in 1970 for population centers with 5,000 or more residents and had successfully fluoridated 70 percent of the public's water supply.



Israelis protest against water fluoridation in front of the Health Ministry in Jerusalem, March 12, 2013. (photo credit: Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Despite the widespread fluoridation, German, a member of the Yesh Atid party, has made no secret about her disdain for the practice. During her tenure as mayor of Herzliya, she successfully stopped the national government from fluoridating the city's water supply.

Shortly after she was appointed health minister in 2013, she announced her plans to end public fluoridation once and for all. However, following a wave of backlash from public health experts and government officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she mandated that fluoridation would only continue for population centers that opted for the program.

The program, which had been opted into by local authorities of 5.3 million residents, has no longer become optional, as German officially announced her decision to discontinue fluoridation on August 26.

German acknowledged that the naturally occurring element is beneficial in preventing dental decay, but strongly defended her position in a letter to a medical group, writing that “doctors have told me that fluoridation may harm pregnant women, people with thyroid problems and the elderly.”

She added that fluoridation is an infringement on personal rights and, furthermore, unreasonable considering that only 2 percent of tap water is used for drinking.

Despite her justifications, many municipalities and members of the country’s medical and academic communities remain unconvinced and claim that there will be disproportionate consequences for children in underprivileged communities.



Health Minister Yael German (photo credit: Flash90)

Professor Eli Somekh and Dr. Zahi Grossman, the chair and secretary general of Israel’s Pediatricians Union, were among those who opposed German’s first attempt to ban fluoridation in 2013. “National fluoridation cessation... may harm the health of children’s teeth. The Union of Pediatricians is convinced that fluoridation of drinking water is the safest, most efficient and egalitarian method in the world to reduce tooth decay.”

With the discontinuation, Israel has joined the ranks of countries like Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which have abandoned or outright banned water fluoridation altogether.

The technique is practiced in Australia, Ireland and the United States, among 21 others.