

June 19, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

On behalf of the undersigned members of the Organized Dentistry Coalition, we urge the Department of Defense (DoD) to maintain current water fluoridation levels on overseas bases. Water fluoridation is essential to dental health, which remains a critical component of military readiness and directly impacts the overall health of service members and their families.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has long affirmed the importance of community water fluoridation in preventing cavities and tooth decay, describing the measure as one of the major factors “responsible for the decline in dental caries (tooth decay) in the second half of the 20th century.”¹ The CDC also cites research showing that water fluoridation reduces cavities by approximately 25% in both children and adults and that maintaining fluoridation programs results in significant cost savings.² Together, fluoridated water and fluoride toothpaste offer more protection from cavities than either one alone.³

Approximately two million Active Duty family members, Reserve members, and Reserve family members participate in the TRICARE Dental Program.⁴ A significant number of military dependents on overseas bases, particularly children, lack access to base dental clinics and must rely on local providers through TRICARE Dental for care. Altering water fluoridation could result in increased dental issues for this community. Fluoridating community water systems is especially important for the nearly 64,000 children of Active Duty Service members living abroad, as research shows that discontinuing fluoridation leads to a significant increase in dental decay among children.^{5,6}

Past DoD policies have recognized the direct link between fluoridated water and dental readiness, reinforcing the necessity of maintaining this vital public health measure. In a 2003 directive, the DoD established a requirement to support the achievement of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Healthy People Goals and Objectives throughout the DoD, which includes the objective of providing optimally fluoridated water to the population.^{7,8} In a 2011 memorandum, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs recognized optimally fluoridated water as “a proven disease prevention program that improves and sustains the military readiness and health of military personnel.”⁹ Service members’ dental

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4841a1.htm>

² https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/about/index.html#cdcreference_1

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/faq/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2024/09/23/Annual-Evaluation-of-the-TRICARE-Program-FY24>

⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/milmed/advance-article/doi/10.1093/milmed/usaf044/8109227>

⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34309045/>

⁷ <https://www.med.navy.mil/Portals/62/Documents/NMFA/NMCPHC/root/Field%20Activities/Pages/NEPMU6/Operational%20Support/Environmental%20Health/DoDDIR-1010-10.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hp2000/hp2k01.pdf>

⁹ <https://americanfluoridationsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Dept-of-Defense-CWF-Memo-2013.pdf>

readiness has been found to be below the Military Health System's readiness goals, highlighting the need for continued preventive measures such as fluoridation.¹⁰ Dental decay can lead to serious health complications and is a major reason junior enlisted members are classified as non-deployable.¹¹ Furthermore, removing fluoridated water from community water systems on overseas bases would result in a decline in dental health, making our military more reliant on foreign dental care.

Given the documented benefits of fluoridation in reducing cavities and promoting overall oral health, we strongly urge the DoD to maintain the current water fluoridation standard of 0.7 mg/L in public water systems on overseas bases.¹² Doing so will safeguard military readiness while ensuring families continue to receive essential preventive healthcare.

Respectfully,

Academy of General Dentistry
American Academy of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology
American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry
American Academy of Periodontology
American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research
American Association of Endodontists
American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons
American Association of Orthodontists
American Dental Association
American Student Dental Association
Society of American Indian Dentists

¹⁰ <https://www.health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2024/09/23/Annual-Evaluation-of-the-TRICARE-Program-FY24>

¹¹ <https://americanfluoridationsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Dept-of-Defense-CWF-Memo-2013.pdf>

¹² https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/471505m_Vol3.pdf?ver=2020-06-29-154111-023