



Community Water Fluoridation: 10 Tips for Talking to Reporters

1. **Prepare some good soundbites — well ahead of time.** Before you think about contacting a reporter (or before think one might contact you), create soundbites to cover the 3 key points you want to communicate. Practice saying them. Each soundbite should take less than 25 seconds to say. Sometimes it's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it that determines whether you get quoted in a story. Here are two examples of soundbites that convey a key point about community water fluoridation:

If water fluoridation were a brand-new idea, I would be one of those people asking a lot of questions about it. But the good news is that we have 70 years of experience and research proving it's a safe, effective way to help prevent cavities.

OR

There is a lot of confusion out there. Many people don't realize that fluoride is a mineral that exists naturally in water supplies. By adding just a little more fluoride, we can reach the level that is proven to reduce the rate of cavities for children and adults.

2. **Take the initiative in developing relationships with reporters.** Email is the best way to introduce yourself or your coalition to a reporter. If it's a coalition, one individual should be designated to handle this role. If several people contact the reporter, it makes it harder to deliver a clear, focused message. Your contact's first email to a reporter should be brief, perhaps thanking the reporter for writing an article about dental disease and/or water fluoridation. You might use the email as an opportunity to correct or clarify a detail that appeared in the reporter's story, but choose your words carefully and respectfully. (Keep in mind that the vast majority of reporters genuinely strive to write accurate stories.) If you clarify or correct something, try to find some aspect of the story to compliment. Establish yourself as a resource by sharing a few links to reliable websites that reporters will find useful. Two excellent sites to suggest are www.cdc.gov/fluoridation (CDC) and www.iLikeMyTeeth.org/fluoridation (American Academy of Pediatrics).
3. **Avoid surprises.** First, learn as much as you can about the reporter *before* your interview. Does the reporter cover a variety of issues? Or does the reporter specialize in health and medical issues? Has the reporter written any stories about oral health or similar issues over the past few years? If so, were the articles generally accurate, or did they provide a more of a platform to people with fringe points of view? Second, make sure you're clear on the details for your interview. Get the answers to the following questions. Will the interview be conducted by phone or in person? If it's a TV or radio interview, will your interview be "live" or will it be taped and aired later? If the interview is "live," will you be the only guest on the program? If your interview is on camera, appearance matters more.
4. **Use analogies that will enhance understanding.** Adding fluoride to water might seem strange to many Americans until someone uses this analogy: "Adding fluoride to water is like adding Vitamin D to milk and iodine to salt. America has a tradition of fortifying foods and beverages to prevent disease." Consider other helpful analogies. Here is another example:

Protecting teeth from cavities is a lot like protecting passengers from a car crash. Having seatbelts doesn't mean we should take air bags out of our cars. Both offer protection. Likewise, fluoride toothpaste and fluoridated water both have a key role in protecting teeth from cavities.

5. **Don't rush into a phone interview.** Doing an interview on only a moment's notice means you are more likely to make a mistake or forget to convey a key point. Ask the reporter for their deadline, but have a good excuse ready for why you can't talk to them right then. But assure them that you *will* call them back in a timely manner — and remember to do so.
6. **Anticipate tough questions.** Think of the two or three toughest questions you are likely to be asked. Develop clear, concise answers for each of these questions that don't sound defensive. Test your answers on a friend or colleague who will give you honest, constructive feedback. Be prepared to use "bridging" (*see #8*) to help redirect the interview in a better direction.
7. **Avoid jargon or clinical terms.** Many consumers of news media are likely to be confused by terms like "caries" and "tooth eruption." For these reasons, stick with basic words that people outside the medical/dental communities will understand. Use "cavities" or "tooth decay" instead of caries.
8. **Don't do an interview — manage an interview.** Think of it as an opportunity. Consider the 3 key points you want readers to know about oral health and fluoridation (but no more than 3). What are those points? Focus on them. These techniques can help you:

FLAGGING: Using certain words in your answer can help you emphasize your key points. Example: "... but let's keep in mind that *fluoridation is a practice that has been used safely and effectively for nearly 70 years.*" Or try this: "*The important thing for us to remember is that fluoridation is a practice that has been used safely and effectively for nearly 70 years.*"

BRIDGING: Bridging helps you redirect the conversation when a reporter starts to go off on a tangent. You can bridge back to your key points with a phrase like this: "*That assertion overlooks the key point, which is that ...*" Another example is this: "*If there were any substance to that claim, you wouldn't see leading organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics continuing to support fluoridation.*"

9. **Don't guess the answer and don't talk "off the record."** If you aren't sure of the answer to a question, tell the reporter you will consult with appropriate experts and follow up soon. Never guess. Your credibility is too important to jeopardize. Sharing information "off the record" can easily backfire. Some journalists might respect your wish, but others may not. Even if you think the interview is over, do not say anything that you wouldn't want to see in a news story.
10. **Stay composed at all times.** Don't allow yourself to be provoked — even when a reporter asks you a "loaded" question or goes off on a tangent. Getting angry or sounding defensive will reflect poorly on you. Take a deep breath. Use bridging and flagging to return to your key points.