

Xylitol: Effective Tooth Decay Fighter

Almost everyone knows that eating a lot of sugary foods and drinking beverages sweetened with sugar can lead to dental decay, weight gain, and problems with diabetes. Consuming sugar-free foods and beverages is one way people reduce their risk of dental decay and avoid unnecessary calories.

Many sugar-free products are sweetened with artificial sweeteners such as saccharin (Sweet and Low®) or aspartame (Equal®). These products have no calories and cannot be converted by mouth bacteria into the acids that cause cavities. Most people use them to sweeten tea or coffee or consume them in diet drinks. For chewing gum and sugar-free candies, however, a different kind of sugar substitute known as a sugar-alcohol* is often used. These naturally occurring substances include sorbitol, mannitol, and xylitol.

These sugar alcohols taste sweet and have some calories. Like artificial sweeteners, they don't contribute to dental decay. Most sugar-free gums and candies are sweetened using one or more of these sugar alcohols. While none of these substances contribute to dental decay, only xylitol has unique properties that make it of special interest to dentists and people who want to avoid cavities.

Xylitol was used as a substitute for sugar in Finland during World War II. Because of the war, sugar was not available and the Finns learned to make a sugar substitute from widely abundant birch trees. Later, dental researchers noticed that people who used this sweetener instead of sugar had fewer cavities. Scientists now know that xylitol interferes with the growth of cavity-causing bacteria. Research continues to confirm the benefits of xylitol to help people reduce their risk of dental decay.

Once, you would have had to travel to Europe to get xylitol products. Today, however, sugar-free gums and candies containing cavity-fighting xylitol can easily be found on store shelves in the U.S. and around the world. Many products contain xylitol in addition to other sweeteners like sorbitol.



To get the maximum benefit from xylitol, however, you have to read the label. To prevent cavities, it's important to expose mouth bacteria to enough xylitol every day; and some sugar-free gums don't contain enough xylitol to effectively reduce the number of cavity-causing bacteria. One way to be sure that you are getting the right amount is to choose products that have **xylitol** listed as the **first ingredient**.

In addition to gums and candies, xylitol is now also available as a powdered sugar substitute for use in coffee, tea, baking, and on breakfast cereal. While you can find some products in regular supermarkets, you may have to go to a health food store or buy online to get the products with the highest amounts of xylitol. Some dentists may also carry xylitol gums, mints, or other products to help patients control cavities.

The next time you visit your dentist, ask the dentist or hygienist if xylitol may be right for you or your family. For more information about xylitol and other valuable oral health information, check out the **Oral Health Toolkit** on the Northeast Delta Dental webpage at <http://www.nedelta.com/patients> and enter "xylitol" in the search field.

**While chemists describe these substances as "alcohols" they are used in very small amounts and don't have any of the effects seen with the kind of alcohol found in beer, wine, or spirits. In addition to birch trees, xylitol is found in many berries, corn husks, and other natural plant materials.*

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