

Q: I'm confused about which toothpaste to buy. And the more I read labels the more confused I am. What are all these ingredients--and are they necessary or healthy for me?

A: I am just amazed by the toothpaste aisle in my grocery store. It's a solid wall of choices—each box with a plethora of ingredients promising various results.

To help guide you let's demystify the components of various toothpastes:

- There is an **abrasive** to scrape away food particles and plaque. Beware of non-ADA-approved products. Also remember the best de-plaquer is the action of the toothbrush bristle not the paste.
- **Surfactants** (detergents) and **foaming agents**.
- **Fluoride** is added to make the outer tooth structure (enamel and exposed dentin at the gum line) more resistant to decay. Fluoride is also a de-sensitizer and an antimicrobial. It's really the most healthful ingredient to have in your toothpaste.
- **Anti-tarter agents** help to prevent the formation of calcified plaque (tartar or calculus). Choose this if you are having trouble controlling tarter buildup despite good brushing and flossing techniques.
- **De-sensitizing agents** (other than fluoride), such as Potassium Nitrate help diminish temperature sensitivity, if that's an issue. It's best to let your dentist help you identify the cause of your sensitivity (such as cavities, tooth grinding or recession) before attempting to treat it with toothpaste.
- **Binding agents** and **humectants** keep it smooth and gooey.
- **Whitening agents** in toothpaste are unfortunately not very effective but the whitening claims sell toothpaste.
- **Sweetening agents** are sugar-free such as xylitol, saccharin or sorbitol. If you are sensitive to one of these, be sure to read the label.
- **Flavoring** to mask the taste of the rest of this stuff. When the general population of adults are surveyed they ask for stronger, more intense flavors, and toothpaste manufacturers keep responding. (Remember that a good portion of the adult population smokes, which dulls their tasters.) In adult toothpaste the flavor component may cause gum sensitivity for many patients. With the soreness, the tissue might also appear red, puffy or sloughing. The good news is if you switch to a kids toothpaste (or even Crest original formula) your gum sensitivity should subside pretty quickly.

Don't be afraid to read the box before buying, and consult your dentist or hygienist to find the right paste for you.

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