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# A better sweetener?

Xylitol shows promise as a sweetener that fights cavities. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I heard there is a sugar you can eat that actually fights tooth decay. Is it really true?

A: It is true!

Xylitol is the sweetener and it's finally making a splash in the consumer market, because of its amazing anti-cavity effects. It is a naturally occurring sweetener discovered in the early 1800s. It was approved by the FDA in 1963 as a safe, non-toxic 5 carbon polyol. Originally derived from birch wood, it is now produced from corncobs, making it more affordable than ever before.

Take a look at these health benefits. Xylitol has 40% fewer calories than sugar AND does not cause the typical sugar spike (with the associated insulin response) so it is a suitable sweetener for diabetics or anyone trying to reduce calorie intake. Perhaps the most exciting health benefit is its ability to combat cavity formation.

Xylitol sweetened gums, mints, toothpastes and rinses, until recently found primarily in health food stores, can now be found in mainstream supermarkets. Check some ingredient lists and you might be surprised to know that you're already buying some.

Here's how it works. The mouth is loaded with bacteria (400+ strains) including a hefty cavity-causing bug, Strep. Mutans (SM). Sugar (sucrose and fructose) along with other fermentable carbohydrates provide a rich energy source for SM, which one, stimulates plaque growth and two, produces high levels of acid. Frequent sugar consumption causes breakdown of tooth enamel and eventually the decay reaches the inner layer of tooth (dentin) where it spreads more quickly.

Because xylitol is not metabolized by oral bacteria it does not stimulate acid attacks or plaque growth. And while the sweet flavor naturally increases saliva flow, a naturally alkaline protector, xylitol actually helps us *arrest* cavities.

If you suffer from dry mouth or chronic tooth decay this is great news! Research shows however that in order to be effective in cavity fighting, we have to consume a therapeutic dosage: 6-10 grams of xylitol divided into three consumption periods a day.

P.S. A single warning, from one pet-lover to another: While xylitol is healthy for you, keep it safely tucked away from your dog's or cat's reach, as it is even more dangerous to them than chocolate.