Be aware of artificial sweeteners in chewing gum

Finding natural alternatives requires careful label reading of ingredients

By Doug Bean

Pick up a package of gum from a store shelf and you'll be hard pressed to find one that doesn't contain artificial sweeteners in some form. Sugar substitutes have overtaken the gum market. They're everywhere—even in the brands and varieties that aren't overtly advertised as sugarless or sugar-free.


You didn't know? It's right there in the fine print on the label. A gumshoe detective might need a magnifying glass to find the fake stuff, but look closely at the ingredients and you'll see it there in some form.

Let's say you'd like to buy your children a bag of Big League Chew before a ballgame. But you examine the package and then grudgingly resist, despite their disappointment, because you determine it contains Aspartame, which medical research has linked to headaches, fibromyalgia and other physical problems. Some doctors believe Aspartame disrupts brain function by over-stimulating the neurons.

Then there are gums such as Dubble Bubble that contain high-fructose corn syrup. The widely used sweetener shows up seemingly in everything from processed foods to soft drinks. The fear here is that excess consumption could contribute to obesity.

You probably didn't realize that a typical stick of gum is made up of 79 percent artificial sweeteners or sugar to enhance the taste.

And if that isn't bad enough, most manufacturers use a concoction of petroleum-based synthetic materials to make the rubbery, gummy base. Take another look at the wrapper and you'll see additives and preservatives with questionable names like phenylalanine, polyethylene, polyvinyl acetate or stearic acid.

Better yet, you might want to spit it out. The gum, that is. As you're reading this, don't swallow your gum—or claims from the big companies that these additives are perfectly fine and dandy.

So what's a person to do? Give up gum completely? Tell the kids to gnaw on leather?

Fortunately, for anyone who has vowed to steer clear of artificial sweeteners, there are natural alternatives.

Xylitol-enhanced gum has become a popular choice today along with peelu, ginseng and one offering made without processed sugars, preservatives and artificial flavorings or colorings.

Glee Gum is about as pure as it gets, from the cane sugar in its mix to the chicle in its base. The company emphasizes its minimal-processing techniques and eschews chemical pesticides and food additives. Glee is gluten free and vegetarian (but not vegan because of the beeswax and resinous glaze), free from the eight major food allergens and also safe for people who experience adverse reactions to latex. Glee come comes in six flavors ranging from bubble gum to triple berry to peppermint.

"Nowadays, almost all chewing gum contains Aspartame - whether it is sugared or sugar-free," said Deborah Schimberg, Glee's president and founder. "And many folks complain that Aspartame causes lots of negative side effects. We believe that gum should be a fun, sweet treat. It shouldn't make you sick. That's why we keep Glee Gum all natural."

Chicle is similar to latex but comes from a different source. Chicle is harvested by skilled chicleros who tap the sap of the Sapodilla trees in the rainforests of Central America. The gooey substance not only makes a natural..."
base but also provides a source of revenue for local economies in impoverished third-world areas. And if you’re concerned about the environment, you’ll be happy to know that Glee emphasizes rainforest conservation and supports For the Planet, an alliance of businesses that donate 1 percent of sales to a network of environmental organizations worldwide.

"Glee Gum is the best gum on the market because it doesn't have any artificial coloring, flavoring, sweeteners or preservatives." Schimberg said. "It's also the only gum in North America made with chicle. The harvest of chicle is sustainable and helps to conserve the rainforest. So Glee is a ‘green' gum as well as a great one!"

Almost every other company now uses a synthetic concoction instead of chicle for its gum base. If you want to learn more about chicle and the history of gum, there’s an excellent book on the subject published in 2009. Chicle: The Chewing Gum of the Americas, From the Ancient Mayas to William Wrigley, written by Jennifer P. Mathews, traces the roots of gum to Central America and discusses its socioeconomic impact in the United States.

Xylichew, which is manufactured in Finland and found in natural foods stores and cooperatives, includes some original latex from the sapodilla tree in its gum base. Xylichew and Spry are among several gums on the market enhanced with Xylitol, a popular alternative to the “sugarless” products.

The advantage of Xylitol, derived from naturally occurring sugar alcohol, is its dental friendliness. In a Xylitol-rich oral environment, acid buildup is less likely to occur, reducing the chance of teeth-clinging bacteria that could lead to cavities and gum-tissue disease.

Recent evidence points to a reduction in a child’s cavity rate through a mother’s use of Xylitol gum (four pieces per day), according to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry’s 2009 oral health guide. Other studies of children and adults indicate similar results. However, Xylitol gum chewing should not replace regular care such as brushing and flossing for optimum dental health.

Another plus is that Xylitol is safe for diabetics. Its slow absorption rate does not cause a spike in blood sugar or insulin response. One teaspoon of Xylitol contains only 10 calories and has a glycemic index of seven.

On the negative side, excessive use of large amounts of Xylitol (40 grams per day or more) can cause diarrhea, allergic reactions and a laxative effect in some instances because of the sugar alcohol. Also be aware that Xylitol can be deadly when ingested by dogs.

Examine the label closely when choosing a Xylitol gum. There are some pretenders out there claiming to be sweetened with Xylitol but in reality contain a relatively miniscule amount.

That is not the case with Peelu dental chewing gum. It is sweetened with 100 percent Xylitol. As the product name suggests, the gum possesses peelu extract from the Arak tree, most commonly found in the Middle East and Asia.

Peelu has long been noted for the whitening and cleaning properties associated with its soft fibers and natural chlorine compounds. The micro-fibers are taken from peelu sticks and placed in the gum pieces. Coupled with the Xylitol, the Peelu squares can provide dental benefits as well as jaw-dropping enjoyment.

Not only should chewing gum be a pleasurable activity, it has psychological and physiological advantages as well. Among them are weight management, reduced food cravings, stress relief, breath freshening and increased alertness, focus and concentration.

The next time you buy gum, thoroughly check out the ingredients, just as you would any other food product, and then chomp until the cows come home. And pity the poor cow that has only his cud to chew.

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