

But what will it do to your breath?

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Imagine shoving a bunch of insects and worms into your mouth like those gastronomically challenged folks on “Fear Factor.”

A German company hopes a lot more people besides game-show contestants will want to have microscopic creepy crawlers in their mouths, while it experiments with a chewing gum containing a specific strain of live bacteria, similar to that found in yogurt.

Chemical giant BASF is working on a range of consumer products — from gum to toothpaste and mouthwash — containing the lactobacillus bacterium to be introduced in 2007.

BASF has joined forces with another firm, OrganoBalance, to develop the products.

According to Stefan Marcinowski, BASF executive director of research, a specific strain of lactobacillus has been isolated that binds to *Streptococcus mutans* — the bacteria that causes tooth decay.

Marcinowski said early human test results show that using the bug-laden chewing gum reduces the amount of “bad” bacteria in the mouth. The gum’s bacteria force the other bacteria to clump together, allowing them to be expelled from the mouth.

Of course, dental experts would advise that brushing and flossing regularly and avoiding high-sugar foods can help keep the “bad” bacteria at bay.

The company is also studying two other strains of bacteria to see how they react with odor-producing bacteria found in the armpit or between the toes. BASF hopes to produce deodorant based on two other bacteria strains.

Victor Sierpina, a physician and professor of integrative medicine at the University of Texas Medical Branch, said it seems likely that this type of product could reduce bacteria levels.

Various types of probiotic bacteria in the body help with many functions besides limiting the growth of harmful bacteria, he said.

Sierpina noted that consumers will no doubt be bombarded in the coming years with so-called “functional foods” that contain trace amounts of various substances to make

us think, feel and sleep better.

The bacteria found in yogurt supports the immune function by helping the body produce lactic and acetic acid, which inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria that can lead to diarrhea or infection.

Your body needs an armada of the tiny bugs — more than a billion colony-forming units per day are considered to be the minimum amount for the healthy maintenance of intestinal microflora.

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