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Here's a novel cavity fighter: Just pop in chewing gum

The Lowell Sun

Here's something to sink your teeth into: the German chemical company BASF recently announced the development of a bacteria-laden chewing gum that, it asserts, can destroy mouth microbes that cause tooth decay. Without, as the third grade joke goes, even having already been chewed.

A strain of lactobacillus called anti-carries, found in live yogurt, binds to one of the tiny mouth organisms most responsible for cavities, called streptococcus mutans, a sort of goo that sticks to and eventually breaks down tooth enamel. According to BASF, anti-carries keep the s. mutans corraled, thereby preventing decay -- and, hopefully, taking a bite out of time in the dentist's chair.

So will four out of five recommend it? I drilled a few on the invention.

"It could be another arrow in the quiver of fighting tooth decay," said Dr. Ian Barwick, a Dracut dentist, from his Lakeview Avenue office. "It won't keep us from having to brush and floss, but obviously anything that can keep the bad bacteria count inside the oral cavity at bay is a wonderful thing."

"It's going counter culture to what Colgate and Crest having been trying to do by adding chemicals to their products," said Dr. Ted Pappay, a Lowell dentist, who dubbed the bacteria gum "promising."

"Certainly you're getting rid of strep mutans, and that's the big boy on the block (in terms of causing cavities), but there are more than 160 species of bacteria in the mouth, so it's probably just a thumbnail of what's out there. I don't think it's going to be a catch-all."

Of course, natural health advocates have long advocated eating cheese after consuming sugary foods to help reduce tooth decay and bad breath, insisting that swapping out a deliciously sweet dessert for a savory hunk of Havarti works to keep mouths ship-shape. This European tradition of ending a meal with small chunks of good cheese -- what many in this country might consider a civilized, if snooty ritual -- actually stimulates the salivary glands, which wash away sugars that accumulate during a meal. Plus, cheese's calcium and phosphate actually form a kind of barrier that prevents plaque from building up.

Whether the bacteria-laden chewing gum will succeed in the American marketplace, however, remains to be seen. If people are really looking to reduce cavities, some dentists say, they should stick to what's known.

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"I hate to sound like a broken record, but it's brushing, flossing and using fluoride rinses that are the tried and true method of keep down cavities and periodontal disease," Pappy laughed. "What really works is what goes on for 20, 30, 40 years. With this gum, they really need more time in the lab."

The anti-bacterial gum will hit retailers by 2007. Sweet.

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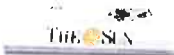
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