



Gum chewing could offer health benefits

Chewing gum has never had a high-class image, but the chewy habit is experiencing an image upgrade. Research is finding health benefits related to chewing gum that go far beyond the widely touted dental health benefits of sugarless gum.

Question: How does gum chewing benefit teeth?

Answer: The American Dental Association explains that chewing gum increases the flow of saliva. This in turn helps to flush sugars, food debris and decay-causing acids out of the mouth.

The alkaline nature of saliva also helps to prevent tooth decay by neutralizing acids in the mouth. Sugarless gum is recommended because the sugar in regular gum can be converted to acids by plaque bacteria on the teeth and cause tooth decay.

During gum chewing, saliva flow increases to about 10 times the usual rate. Since saliva delivers minerals like calcium and phosphorus to the teeth, this increased saliva flow benefits mineralization of tooth enamel.

Q: What are other benefits of chewing gum?

A: People often claim that gum chewing has a stress-reducing effect. A limited amount of research indicates that many gum chewers do experience calming, relaxed and satisfied feelings while chewing gum.

There also is growing evidence that gum chewing can enhance brain function. Some studies have reported improved memory, increased ability to maintain attention, and enhanced learning ability.

Exactly how gum chewing enhances brain function is not fully understood. But it is known that blood flow to the brain increases by as much as 25 percent to 40 percent during gum chewing and brain scans show increased neural activity in parts of the brain involved with complex information processing.

The U.S. Army has taken these brain-boosting effects of chewing gum to another level by adding caffeine. One piece of their "Stay Alert" gum provides

100 milligrams of caffeine, the amount in a typical 6-ounce cup of coffee.

Chewing gum also burns a few calories. The jaw muscles expend about 10 calories per hour when chewing. In addition, chewing gum tends to reduce the appetite for sweet foods, especially sweet snacks. In combination, the bit of jaw exercise and reduced snacking may contribute to weight loss.

So, if you like chewing gum, you are justified in claiming that you chew for health reasons. But, the gum-chewing image upgrade still needs to get over the challenge of proper disposal. Of course, gum chewed responsibly should not end up on sidewalks or under the edge of tables. Perhaps this is an opportunity to recycle those old ashtrays. Fill them with a little sand and call them "gumtrays."

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