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How Sweet It Is

With an increasing number of people trying to avoid sugary foods and drinks in order to maintain good oral and overall health, natural sugar substitutes have become more widely available. One such natural sweetener, xylitol, is added to foods and drinks, as well as toothpastes and mouthrinses. While it has positive benefits, there are some side effects associated with this sweetener. Read on for more information about xylitol.

What is xylitol?

Xylitol is a naturally occurring alcohol found in most plant material that is often extracted from birchwood. As a sugar substitute in foods like candy and gum, as well as toothpastes and mouthrinses, xylitol aids in cavity prevention.

How does it work?

When you eat or drink sugary foods, the sugar interacts with bacteria in your mouth. The bacteria "feed" off the sugar and multiply. Once the bacteria grow, they make acids that can eat away the enamel on your teeth. The acid then causes tooth decay, and cavities begin to form. However, xylitol does not break down like sugar, and it can help neutralize the acid level in your mouth, which may prevent tooth decay from occurring. Xylitol also prevents bacteria from sticking to your teeth. It is added to some chewing gums, candies, and other oral health products like toothpastes and mouthrinses to prevent tooth decay. Adults and children who use products containing xylitol can significantly reduce cavity formation.

How much xylitol should I have?

Some brands of chewing gum contain very small amounts of xylitol and are mostly ineffective in preventing tooth decay. Be sure to look for products that contain 100 percent xylitol and try for at least four or five exposures with your teeth spread out throughout the day. Using xylitol five times every day provides the most effective oral health benefits.

Are there any side effects?

If consumed at the recommended levels, xylitol is safe for children and adults. Xylitol is safe in the amounts found in foods, gum, and oral health products. Some of the initial physical side effects of consuming products with xylitol include diarrhea and intestinal gas, which usually will subside over time.

Are there side effects for pets?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration reports that xylitol—even in the small amounts found in candies and other products—is extremely toxic in both dogs and ferrets. The physical effects of xylitol on pets include a sudden drop in blood sugar, seizures, liver failure, and even death. You may see your pet vomit, become depressed, and lose coordination. These signs may appear immediately after consuming xylitol or may occur up to a few days after. If your pet ingests a product that contains xylitol, it is important to seek veterinary help immediately.

When used correctly, xylitol is a great addition to your oral health regimen. If you are interested in learning more about xylitol, talk with your dentist about which products are most effective and how they should be used.

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