Antiseptic vs. antibacterial mouthwashes

Dear Alice,

What is the significant difference between a product that is antiseptic and one that is antibacterial? All of the antiseptic mouthwashes I find have a great amount of alcohol in them. This can be very irritating to the mouth. I have found one that is alcohol free, but it says it is antibacterial.

Thanks for your help.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Mouthwashes can help prevent cavities, slow the buildup of plaque, and fight bad breath. Antibacterial products kill bacteria, or hinder their reproduction. Antiseptic substances inhibit the growth and reproduction of many microorganisms, including bacteria, as well as fungi, protozoa, and viruses.

A mouthwash that kills or reduces the number of bacteria in one's mouth can decrease the production of the sulfur compounds that are one cause of bad breath. For other causes, see More on bad breath (halitosis) in the Go Ask Alice! archive. Some mouthwashes contain ingredients, such as cetylpyridinium chloride (CPC), zinc chloride, or chlorhexidine, which may directly neutralize these sulfur compounds.

The greatest difference between antibacterial and antiseptic mouthwashes is exactly what you pointed out: most antiseptic mouthwashes contain a significant amount of alcohol, often about 25 percent. Some people, yourself included, find alcohol irritating. Alcohol is a desiccant, meaning it tends to dry things out, including the lining of your mouth. Having a dry mouth could actually aggravate bad breath. In fact, most dentists will tell you that the greatest preventative measure against bad breath is to drink plenty of water to promote saliva production in the mouth, as saliva itself has natural antibacterial properties. Happy rinsing!

Alice!

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