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Alcohol in mouthwash — Does it cause cancer? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My boyfriend thinks that mouthwash that contains alcohol is harmful to your gums and causes cancer. Is there any truth to this? Is alcohol harmful in mouthwash?

Thank you,

D

Answer

Dear D,

There is conflicting research relating to whether or not mouthwash containing alcohol causes cancer. While some studies associate the use of mouthwash containing alcohol with an increased risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancers (cancers of the mouth and throat), other studies contradict this finding and indicate no association with cancer development. However, most research has found at least a correlation or elevated risk with using mouthwash containing alcohol and potential cancer development.

Despite contradictions in the research, it's important to know that high-alcohol content mouthwashes have been reported to have other adverse effects, with few overall benefits. Reported side-effects of high-alcohol mouthwash includes corroded fillings and drying out of the mucosal tissue in the gums and inner cheeks — causing dry or burning sensations in the mouth. Excessive use of alcoholic mouthwash has also been linked with mouth ulcers and oral pain.

Several studies have failed to demonstrate a significant advantage to using alcohol-containing mouthwashes over alcohol-free mouthwashes. The alcohol in mouthwash provides no unique oral health benefits. In fact, alcoholic mouthwashes are no more effective than their alcohol-free counterparts. Indeed, companies use alcohol in mouthwashes as an inexpensive preservative for increased product shelf life. If you can't find an alcohol-free mouthwash, consider one that has a low alcohol concentration (some have a concentration as high as 26%), and if you're still concerned, try eliminating mouthwash use altogether in favor of thoroughly brushing and flossing your teeth twice a day. Mouthwash is generally cosmetic and has no lasting effect on bad breath

or oral hygiene. If you experience bad breath, it's best to take a trip to your dentist.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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