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More interest in toothpaste ingredients is only natural

By Columbia and Catherine Jhee
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NEW YORK - Just as consumers are eating more organic foods, they're looking for personal-care products made with natural ingredients too, and the health and beauty industry is going greener. So it's only natural that interest in natural toothpaste also is growing.

For shoppers such as Ducky Nguyen, 35, the ideal toothpaste not only cleans and freshens but also protects against cavities and gum disease as it whitens teeth. While browsing the toothpaste options at a Whole Foods Market in New York City, she said she had used Tom's of Maine, a toothpaste marketed as natural, for eight years – once she got used to the flavors. "I first tried the fennel, and that just wasn't for me," she said with a laugh.

But when she realized that Tom's of Maine didn't offer "all of the gum protection and tartar control that regular toothpastes do," she finally felt she had to switch, she said. She's been using Colgate Total since 2004. But now she wonders if natural toothpastes can provide the same sort of protection without added ingredients and potentially harmful chemicals.

Companies that make natural toothpastes now offer almost as many varieties as do Colgate and Crest. (A drugstore may carry as many as 15 varieties of each brand.) And while the shelves at Whole Foods are stocked with dozens of "natural oral care" products – with or without fluoride, in minty and fruity flavors, gels and pastes – by brands such as Burt's Bees and Nature's Gate, products for consumers interested in natural toothpastes are becoming even more widely available. A shopper at a CVS drugstore is likely to find Crest's Nature's Expressions formula right next to products by Tom's of Maine and the Natural Dentist.

Definition of 'natural' varies

But a careful look at these toothpastes shows that the definition of "natural" varies. Some may be referring to key ingredients, such as peppermint oil, while others say they don't use artificial ingredients.

Dr. Eric Shapira of Montara, Calif., a spokesman for the Academy of General Dentistry, said he believes that many of these products try to attract people who are "mindlessly" looking for green products.

He urged consumers to be cautious; some products marketed as natural and homeopathic have ingredients that may cause allergic reactions or worse. "Some of the menthols and eucalyptols in these natural formulas can actually burn tissue," he said.

Dr. Phil Klein, a dentist in Brooklyn, N.Y., said he hasn't noticed any significant problems with patients who prefer natural toothpaste. "But I did have one patient who had tremendous sensitivity when he tried one of the over-the-counter natural toothpastes and began to get soreness and burning," he said. "So I recommended using baking soda, which is also effective for many people."

Klein said that he has noticed more patients who are sensitive to the added chemicals in mainstream toothpastes. "Toothpastes now do more than just clean, and if they whiten and brighten, they might be too abrasive," he said. Evening ingredients meant to reduce enamel sensitivity can bother some people.

Consumers must distinguish

Dr. Kelly Maguire, director of professional advocacy for Tom's of Maine, said that more people are apparently becoming more sensitive to ingredients natural or chemical. "Some people are allergic to the tiniest bit of mint," she said. Tom's ingredients come from natural sources, are not tested on animals and are vegan, kosher and halal-certified. It's possible to whip up a good, natural toothpaste in a customer's kitchen with baking soda, Maguire said. "We're offering products that make it more pleasant to brush by adding natural flavors."

Maguire also noted that Tom's of Maine, which was purchased by Colgate-Palmolive last year, is the first natural toothpaste to receive the Seal of Acceptance from the American Dental Association. She anticipated that the brand's new Whole Care line, which offers cavity protection, tartar control and tooth whitening, will receive the ADA seal next spring.

Dr. Cliff Whall, director of the ADA Acceptance Program, said that just because a product has been granted a seal doesn't mean it has been officially endorsed. "It means the product is effective and does what it says it will do," he explained.

For Whall, it's important that consumers make a distinction between what is commonly considered natural and the ADA's definition. "Even in toothpastes that call themselves natural, there are ingredients – fluorides, abrasives and

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