

Gum for Health

Want some dessert, but you're trying to lose weight?

Want to get lots of vitamins, but don't like eating fruits and vegetables?

Want whiter teeth?

Try chewing some gum.



Gum manufacturers are trying all sorts of new angles to get people to buy more gum. Combining gum with healthy benefits such as vitamins or tooth whiteners gets people's attention so they are more likely to buy the product.

Gum sales tend to stay fairly steady. Some people don't like chewing gum, and the people who do chew gum can only chew so much gum in a day.

"The only way to sell more gum is to constantly be coming up with something new," said David Johnston, Marketing Director for a major gum manufacturer. "A great deal of research goes

into each new product. We plan the flavor and other aspects of the gum so that they appeal to certain groups of people. For example, sour flavors tend to appeal to younger people. Older people often prefer more traditional flavors like cinnamon or mint."

Even the color of the gum is chosen because of how it will attract certain people's attention.

For many people, the flavor is the most important reason for choosing one gum over another. Companies are routinely releasing new flavors.

"Tropical flavors are big right now," explained Mr. Johnston, "especially with younger gum chewers."

Another current trend is flavor blends, such as citrus with strawberry or berry with green apple.

To take the flavor experience one step further, Kraft Foods created a gum called Stride Shift. This gum actually changes flavor as you chew it. It starts out with a fruit flavor and shifts to mint.

Another gum company has created a line of flavors designed to taste like your favorite sweet treat. Wrigley's Extra Dessert Delight comes in flavors like Key Lime Pie, Strawberry Shortcake and Chocolate Chip Mint. This gum is marketed to dieters as a way to get the sweet, yummy flavor of a dessert without the calories of the real thing.

"Gum can be great for helping lose weight," said Jane Mason, a mother of two and frequent gum chewer. "I chew a piece of sugar-free gum every night after dinner, especially while I'm watching TV with my family. It signals to my brain that I'm done eating for the day, but I

don't feel like I'm missing out on having a snack."

Other gum companies are focusing on health benefits to make their gum stand out. Several companies sell gum that claims to whiten teeth. Trident's Vitality, one of the newest on the market, contains vitamin C.

There is some evidence that gum chewing can also help memory, but it appears as though the benefit comes from the act of chewing the gum, not from ingredients in the gum. This means that any gum might work.

"Memory is closely tied to scent in our minds," explained Mr. Johnston. According to the research, if you chew a certain flavor of gum while you study for a test and then chew that same flavor while you take the test, you'll be better able to remember what you studied.

"Our green apple flavor seems to work particularly well," says Mr. Johnston, "but we don't say that on the label. There hasn't been enough research done to prove how much of a difference it makes. There are many people, however, who claim it works for them."

Gum may also help with memory by increasing oxygen flow to the brain. The physical act of chewing seems to bring more oxygen into the nose and mouth, which, in turn, benefits the rest of the body.

The oxygen may help some people feel more awake. "When I'm studying late at night I chew gum," said high school student Rebecca Brigham. "I swear it makes me feel less tired."

Of course, if you are really concerned about staying awake, you can try one of the several gums with caffeine as an added ingredient.

If the flavors and added benefits don't get your attention, maybe the packaging will. "We've made our packages of gum bigger," said David Johnston. "We also redesigned the package to make it less likely for the gum to fall out in a woman's purse."

"We want to create something that generates impulse buys. A person sees our gum at the grocery store check stand, it gets their attention, and they want to buy it. That's what we're going for."

So is it really a good idea to chew gum?

As long as the gum is sugar-free. Chewing sugar-free gum after meals can help clean the teeth, reducing the chance of cavities. Gum is well known as a way to fix bad breath. And the action of chewing the gum can help strengthen teeth.

"My dentist tells me every visit that I should be chewing at least two pieces of sugar-free gum every day," said Jane Mason. "I don't know if every dentist says that, but I'm not going to complain!"