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Beauty Basics: Mouth Watch

By Brian Underwood

We've all been there: at the sink, throwing back a shot of mouthwash that glows like something straight from Krypton, then squeezing out some blue goo for brushing and polishing. But along with that fresh breath and whitening, you're getting a hefty dose of synthetic colors and fragrances, chemical preservatives, and artificial sweeteners. Those harsh extras can irritate your gums and the delicate, permeable skin of your mouth.

"Most of what you put in your mouth goes into your bloodstream, even if you don't swallow it," says Dean Vafiadis, D.D.S., president and founder of the New York Smile Institute. In fact, some chemicals enter your system faster through the mouth than by the usual stomach route.

You can achieve bright, healthy teeth and clean breath just as well with a handful of natural ingredients. Our easy daily routine will get you on your way to a truly cleaner smile.

These rinses, pastes, and strips help brighten smiles and freshen breath without chemicals

Brush

Fluoride is the only ingredient recognized by the Food and Drug Administration to prevent cavities, and the American Dental Association (ADA) emphasizes its importance in maintaining oral health. Some holistic experts, however, shun even the small amount of it in toothpaste due to research linking high exposure to reproductive disorders, kidney problems, and bone cancer. (The ADA stands by the safety of levels found in approved pastes.)

If you choose to skip fluoride, first talk with your dentist to avoid exposing yourself to undue risk for cavities. (Note that people up to age 25 do require at least one source of fluoride, whether from tap water, toothpaste, or mouthwash, according to Vafiadis.) Fluoride or not, look for a toothpaste that can fight the bacterial buildup

MINT CONDITION

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rejuvenate

that leads to gum disease without irritating your mouth or exposing you to risky additives (see "Skip These," opposite page). Gentler alternatives use extracts from grapefruit, goldenseal, and other plants to fight bacteria, while soothing ingredients like green tea, calendula, and aloe combat inflammation. When it comes to whitening, both conventional and natural pastes rely on simple scrubbing to remove surface stains; the difference between them is that natural toothpastes use mild powders like baking soda, chalk, and pulverized bamboo instead of overly harsh abrasives that can dull and damage your teeth over time.

Squeeze these

- ♦ **Weleda Calendula Toothpaste** (fluoride-free), \$5, usa.weleda.com
- ♦ **Kiss My Face Women's Certified Organic Aloe Vera Toothpaste** (fluoride-free), \$6, kissmyface.com
- ♦ **Jason PowerSmile Cinnamon Mint Toothpaste** (fluoride-free), \$5, shop.natural.com
- ♦ **Nature's Gate Peppermint Whitening Toothpaste** (with fluoride), \$7, natures-gate.com
- ♦ **Tom's of Maine Natural Whole Care Toothpaste** (with fluoride), \$4.50, tomsofmaine.com

Rinse

Antimicrobial mouthwash cleans the fleshy surfaces missed by toothbrushes and floss and gets into the crevices around crowns and bridgework. For results that last beyond the final, minty swish, many holistic experts advise choosing



one that's alcohol-free and flavored with natural ingredients.

"It's not just that alcohol fails to protect your gums," says Vafiadis. "It can actually be detrimental." Alcohol dries out the mouth, leading to worse breath, and can zap good-for-you bacteria that help stave off gingivitis (inflammation of the gums). As Vafiadis tells patients at his Manhattan practice, natural products cost about the same and work better—so why not use them? For great taste, essential oils from tea tree, spearmint, cinnamon, peppermint, and other plants offer risk-free alternatives to artificial flavors and often double as preservatives. Your average fluorescent mouth rinse, on the other hand, contains chemical preservatives and dyes that, in high enough concentrations, can contribute to problems ranging from skin irritation to neurotoxicity.

Swish these

- ♦ **Nature's Gate Organics Advanced Care Peppermint Mouthwash with Fluoride**, \$7, natures-gate.com
- ♦ **Natural Dentist Healthy Gums Daily Oral Rinse**, \$8, thenaturaldentist.com
- ♦ **Tom's of Maine Natural Cleansing Mouthwash**, \$5.50, tomsofmaine.com



Whiten

State-of-the-art whitening used to mean dipping a toothbrush in a box of baking soda and using the fine, salty grit to buff off stains. Today's over-the-counter bleaching systems (trays, strips, gels) go deeper, using either carbamide peroxide or hydrogen peroxide (both natural but

Skip These

Watch for these ingredients on labels and consider trying products with gentler alternatives. For a complete analysis of common oral-care ingredients, visit the Environmental Working Group's Cosmetic Safety Database at cosmeticsdatabase.com.

ALCOHOL

The Purpose In mouth rinses, creates a cooling sensation; fights bacteria
The Problem Slows production of saliva, drying out the mouth and weakening its natural defense against bacteria
Better Bets Witch hazel, vegetable glycerin, menthol

ASPARTAME

The Purpose Masks chemical flavors with sweetness
The Problem May trigger headaches (including migraines) and allergies; animal studies suggest a possible cancer link
Better Bets Essential oils; xylitol or stevia (plant-based sugar alternatives)

TRICLOSAN

The Purpose Helps fight plaque-causing bacteria, which can lead to gingivitis (inflammation of the gums)
The Problem Damages aquatic habitats when it washes out with wastewater; can react with residual chlorine from water treatment to produce chloroform, a suspected carcinogen; may interfere with hormone function over time
Better Bets Extracts of green and white tea, grapefruit seed, and tea tree

harsh compounds) to change the color of underlying enamel. Professional sessions deliver faster results because dentists apply a higher concentration of peroxide and then go over each tooth with an activating laser.

Many people experience tooth sensitivity as a result of bleaching treatments, since peroxide can penetrate through to nerve centers. While sensitivity is only temporary, your best bet for maintaining a naturally bright smile is to avoid stain-causing substances like coffee, tea, and cigarettes. Next best: Choose gentle polishes like those found in whitening toothpastes—bamboo, baking soda, chalk, and the like. If you still want to bleach, talk with your dentist about trying a

peroxide whitener with minimal artificial additives. Note, too, that even bleach may not give you snow-white teeth. "Just as some people tan better than others," Vafiadis explains, "some can get brighter teeth, depending on how much enamel you have." Once you achieve a healthy shade, kick into maintenance mode. Wait at least a month between chemical touch ups.

Apply these

- ✦ **Uncle Harry's Natural Products**
Tooth Whitener Powder (non-peroxide, with chalk), \$8, uncleharrys.com
- ✦ **Eco-Dent ExtraBrite Tooth Whitener** (with peroxide), \$8, eco-dent.com

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