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Sour Worse Than Sweet for Your Teeth

Study: Sour-flavored candies do more damage to tooth enamel than sweet varieties.

Emily Main, Rodale.com

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According to anecdotal reports from candy store owners, the souring economy has led to a rise in candy sales, both sweet and sour kinds. But it's not just cavities you have to worry about when turning to those Life Savers; your tooth enamel suffers too, says a study published in the *Journal of the American Dental Association*.

THE DETAILS: The study's authors purchased four different brands of candies that had both sweet and sour counterparts: regular and sour Jolly Rancher, Life Savers, Mike & Ike, and Twizzlers. All the candies were dissolved in a water or artificial saliva mixture, and the researchers immersed teeth in the mixtures for 25 hours (every five hours, the teeth were rinsed off and reimmersed) to simulate sucking on a piece of candy for a long period of time, after which they looked for changes in the tooth enamel using microscopes.

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The teeth exposed to the sour candy varieties had significantly softer enamel than the teeth exposed to the sweet candies, with the largest erosion in enamel seen with the sour Jolly Ranchers. But the greatest difference in tooth enamel erosion between sweet and sour versions of a candy was with the Mike & Ike's; the sour Mike & Ike's produced 92 percent more erosion than that triggered by the regular version of the candy.

What it means: Sour candies have high levels of citric, fumaric, and malic acids. The first comes from citrus fruits and juices, such as oranges, lemons, and limes, and is common in a number of real food and candy, but fumaric and malic acids are a bit more hidden, used not only to make candy sour but also as additives in processed foods.

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Concerned about the damage caused by sour candy, the Minnesota Dental Association recently launched an educational campaign on its website, "The Power of Sour on Your Teeth," calling attention to what it terms a "new and emerging concern." "I don't know that we have the observational data to state that erosion due to candy is any worse than before," says Teresa A. Marshall, PhD, RD/LD, associate professor in the department of preventive and community dentistry at the University of Iowa and lead author of the study. But, she adds, "My guess is that when we are seeing the candy-associated erosion, it is occurring due to abusive eating behaviors—that is, constant eating, excessive portions, holding it in the mouth, not allowing for periods of remineralization or healing to occur—and dry mouth, which is treated by eating more sour candies and isn't cleared by saliva."

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But if they're such a comfort in times of stress, should you send your sour Mike & Ike's packing? No, she says. Just watch how often you have them in your mouth.

She also recommends a few other things to keep them from souring your long-term dental health:

Chew gum

If you like the stress release of having something to chew on, go for gum, "which will stimulate saliva that will aid in hardening the enamel," says Marshall. Even if you stick with candy, Marshall suggests chewing gum afterwards, for the same reason. Plus, gum helps with dry mouth more so than sour candy.

Drink milk

Marshall notes that drinking milk hardens the enamel of your teeth. And, as Rodale.com has reported before, studies have found that if you drink it in the morning, it keeps you from overeating at lunch, so you get double the benefit.

Count the calories

In addition to enamel-damaging acids, candy has calories that can pack on the pounds. Marshall suggests eating just one to two pieces per day and remembering to stick to the government's "MyPyramid" recommendation of getting no more than 350 calories per day from junk food. And that goes for other high-calorie, sugary, enamel-damaging foods like sodas and sports drinks, as well.

Brush—and floss!

That's the best way to protect your teeth, says Marshall. Just don't brush immediately after you've eaten the candy, she says. "If the tooth is softened, the enamel is at risk for mechanical erosion." To get rid of candy breath, chew gum instead, she says.

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