

# Can gum chewing fight cavities?

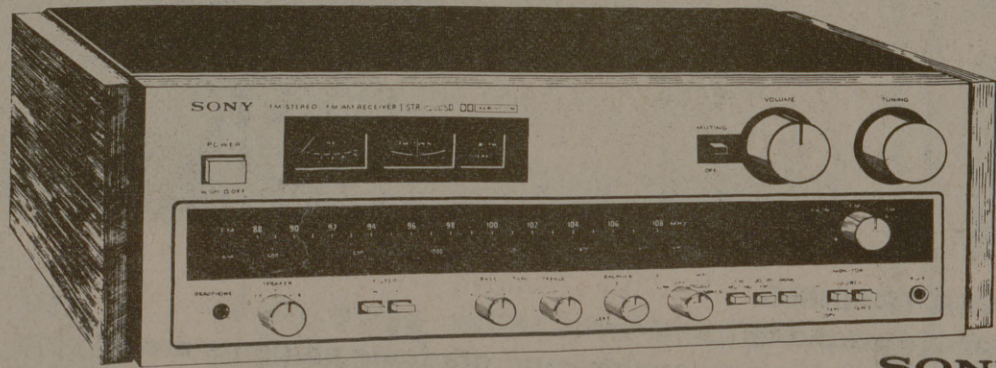
United Press International  
CHICAGO — Dental researchers are trying to see if chewing gum, a villain in many cases of tooth decay, can turn into a cavity fighter with the help of a new sweetener. Researchers at Loyola University's school of preventive dentistry are testing a theory that the sweetener, xylitol, actually cuts the number of decay-producing bacteria in the mouth. The research is underwritten by William Wrigley Co., producers of Wrigley's gum. Dr. Kirk Hoerman, a dentist who heads the school, said interest in xylitol-sweetened gum was

prompted by a 1974 Finnish study which indicated that people who chewed xylitol gum four times a day had a significant reduction in cavities. Initial reports from the Loyola study, Hoerman said, "did not see any effect of xylitol that was as astounding" as in the Finnish research. But he said some encouragement was noted. Whatever the final outcome of the study, Hoerman said, it is important that xylitol alone not be regarded as a cure for cavities. "The important thing right now is to minimize what could be a high

expectation among the public, particularly mothers and children, that xylitol is a miracle, a cure for holes in teeth. It is not a cure for that," he said. Hoerman's study includes three groups of dental students, who chew seven sticks of gum a day for 10 weeks. One group chews gum sweetened 100 percent with xylitol, another gum with sugar sweetening and the third given a gum base with flavoring but no sweetener. Researchers take samples of transparent film called plaque from the students' teeth each week and count the number of bacteria, in-

cluding streptococcus mutants which are known to cause tooth decay. "Initially it looks like the count of streptococci in plaque from xylitol chewers are less than in individuals chewing gum containing sugar," Hoerman said. But he said it is too early to tell whether xylitol is actually reducing the streptococcus count. Xylitol is a chemical which occurs naturally in berries, some fruits, tree leaves and bark and mushrooms. It also is produced naturally in some animal tissues and in the human body.

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