

ALCOHOL MOUTHWASH LINKED TO INCREASED ORAL CANCER

Top independent experts in Australia have called for mouthwashes that contain alcohol to be immediately removed from store shelves. This is after the experts had looked at latest available scientific information on these products, which suggest that they can cause oral cancer.

Details and Findings of Review

The experts had conducted a review which was then published in the *Dental Journal of Australia*. Their language was clear - there was "sufficient evidence" that "alcohol-containing mouthwashes contribute to the increased risk of development of [oral cancer](#)".

The review had looked at and reported on several studies from around the world. One such international study had looked at the habits of 3,210 people and found that the use of mouthwash on a daily basis was a "significant risk factor" for developing head and neck [cancers](#). This was regardless of whether the mouthwash users smoked cigarettes or drank [alcohol](#).

Although the risks were larger for those who smoked *and* used mouthwash (9 times the risk of getting the said cancers), as well as for those who drank *and* used mouthwash (more than 5 times the risk), even mouthwash users who neither smoked nor drank experienced a significant increase in [cancer risk](#) - a whopping 4 to 5 times.

Another study in Brazil similarly linked regular use of mouthwash to oral [cancer](#). This was again the case whether or not the users smoked or drank. "Mouthwash products are in contact with the oral mucosa as much as [alcoholic beverages](#), and may cause chemical aggression of the cells," said the study team from the University of Sao Paulo.

Separately, a review which was published in the *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology* expressed "doubts about the safety of alcohol-containing oral products" and stated that it would be "prudent, precautionary public-health policy to generally refrain from using [ethanol](#) in (mouthwash) products".

Dangers of Alcohol in Mouthwashes

How might the alcohol in mouthwashes increase cancer risk? One possibility is that the ethanol in mouthwashes could allow carcinogens to more easily penetrate the mouth lining, thereby allowing more damage to be done. In addition, acetaldehyde, a poisonous by-product of alcohol, could accumulate in the mouth when someone gargles mouthwash. Cancer risk could then be elevated because this compound might have cancer-causing properties.

Unlike alcoholic drinks, which are an established cancer risk factor, the role of mouthwashes had been iffy. However, many brands of mouthwashes in fact contain higher levels of alcohol than alcoholic [beverages](#) themselves. And while such drinks are swallowed, mouthwashes are kept in the mouth for longer periods of time. With the formation of acetaldehyde and the role of ethanol also at play, the risk factors of alcoholic mouthwashes are thus multi-fold.

In a strange way, because alcoholic beverages are consumed for pleasure and recreation purposes, they seem to then have a "license" to be harmful for [health](#). Mouthwashes, on the other hand, are marketed as health products, which thus makes it very ironic that they could be cancer-causing. But then again, those of us familiar with the workings of conventional [medicine](#) would be well aware that many of the products and methods it pushes are in fact dangerous for human health.

The Need to Reassess the Use of Alcohol-Containing Mouthwashes

According to market surveys, mouthwash use is on the up. And *Listerine*, which is endorsed by the Australian Dental Association (ADA) and is also Australia's best-selling brand, consists of as much as 26% alcohol. Combined with the available research information discussed earlier, these facts surely make for worrying reading.

Professor Michael McCullough, who is an associate professor of oral medicine at the University of Melbourne and who chairs the ADA's therapeutics committee, has called on the agency to reassess its approval of alcohol-containing mouthwashes on an urgent basis. In his view, such mouthwashes should be classed as "prescription only" and should also come with written health warnings.

"We see people with oral cancer who have no other risk factors than the use of alcohol-containing mouthwash, so what we've done in this study is review all the evidence that's out there. Since this article came out, further evidence has come out too. We believe there should be warnings," he said.

"If it was a facial cream that had the effect of reducing acne but had a four- to five-fold increased risk of skin cancer, no one would be recommending it," Professor McCullough added.

Dr Camile Farah, who is director of research at the University of Queensland's School of Dentistry, co-led the review with Professor McCullough. And the two of them have further suggested for mouthwashes to be restricted to medical use on a short-term basis only. In addition, they feel that the long-term use of alcoholic mouthwashes is "inadvisable".

One possible alternative is alcohol-free versions of commercial mouthwashes. Better still, one could use herbal mouthwashes, which are a viable, effective and much safer option, although they may also be more difficult to find.

As with the case more often than not, it does not look as if the authorities in question are going to pounce on the findings of this review and quickly adjust their policies to protect the public. In the meantime, especially with oral cancer being such a painful and debilitating disease, would you want to continue taking chances?