

## Milder Listerine Announced Following Cancer Report

BY RON WINSLOW

Staff Reporter of the Wall Street Journal  
NEW YORK - Warner-Lambert Co. said it is developing a lower-alcohol version of its popular, harsh-tasting Listerine mouthwash.

The disclosure comes in the wake of news reports that a pending study from National Cancer Institute suggests users of high-alcohol mouthwashes face an increased risk of cancer of the mouth and throat. Listerine is 26.9% alcohol and the new version is expected to contain significantly less alcohol.

Joseph D. Williams, chairman and chief executive of Warner-Lambert, said the company's development of a lower-alcohol formula is "coincidental. It's not directed at any cancer problem." Other officials said the company will offer the reformulated version to appeal to European consumers and lure new U.S. customers.

The big Morris Plains, N.J., drug and consumer products company's stock tumbled \$3.125 to \$75 in New York Stock Exchange composite trading in response to news of the study. Listerine is the leading mouthwash in the U.S., with a 30% market share last year, the company said. Domestic sales were \$238 million, while sales in Europe and Japan added \$42 million.

The institute said the study, which is expected to appear in a future issue of the journal *Cancer Research*, didn't "firmly

establish" the increased risk of cancer and said "it is premature to make recommendations about using mouthwash" based on the results.

Researchers surveyed 866 people with mouth and throat cancer and 1,249 people without the disease, and after adjusting for use of tobacco and alcohol, found a slightly increased risk of the cancers among mouthwash users. According to a summary of the findings, men who used a mouthwash with 25% or higher alcohol content had a 60% higher risk of cancer while women had a 90% higher risk than people who didn't use mouthwash. However, the risk was seen only in people who used mouthwashes with 25% or higher alcohol content. The summary gave no indication of what kind of mouthwash any of those involved in the study used.

Mr. Williams disclosed the new formula in response to a question at a previously scheduled meeting of securities analysts. Mr. Williams said the company hadn't seen the cancer data but asserted that Listerine was safe and effective. He didn't give any other details of plans for Listerine, but after the meeting other officials said a new formula was developed when consumers in Britain and elsewhere in Europe objected to the taste of Listerine and that it was likely such a version would be marketed in the U.S. Lodewijk J.R. de Vink, executive vice president, U.S. operations, said the company will continue to market its basic

Listerine after it brings out the reformulated version.

The alcohol content is important to the product's claims for germ-killing ability, and the company touts Listerine as the only leading mouthwash with the American Dental Association seal vouching for effectiveness in controlling dental plaque and a gum disease called gingivitis. But officials believe tests with a lower-alcohol product - the company wouldn't disclose the level - will prove effective enough against those problems to also win the ADA seal.

Competitors have used advertising to take aim at Listerine's sharp, bitter taste, but haven't succeeded in denting its popularity in the U.S. Indeed, Warner-Lambert's own advertising has exploited the taste as an indication of its effectiveness.

At the analysts meeting, the company told analysts it expects 1991 net to grow 15% to 16% and signaled that Melvin R. Goodes, president and chief operating officer, will succeed Mr. Williams as chairman and chief executive in August. The earnings projection assumes sales will increase between 8% and 9%. Mr. Williams said he would ask the board at the July meeting to name Mr. Goodes, 56 years old, as his successor effective Aug. 1 and recommend Mr. de Vink, 46, to succeed Mr. Goodes. Mr. Williams is to retire August 31, but will remain a director and chairman of the board's executive committee.

**New for canker-sore sufferers: A study at the University of Oslo in Norway saw a 70 percent decrease in the small, craterlike ulcers when patients prone to them brushed with a toothpaste without sodium lauryl sulfate. Researchers suspect that SLS, a common dental detergent, disrupts the mouth's mucosal layer, leaving it more vulnerable to irritants and allergens.**

*Longevity, August, 1995*

## Mouthwashes may harm children

DEAR DR. GOTT: I've recently read that alcohol-containing mouthwash is an unrecognized cause of poisoning in young children. Listerine is touted to have a 26.9

percent alcohol content, the highest of some 12 brands tested. Is anything being done to alert the public of this potential hazard?

DEAR READER: You're right that mouthwash containing alcohol can be toxic for small children. In fact, the American Association of Poison Control Centers recently reported that during the past few years, more than 10,000 children under the age 6 ingested such products.

One ounce of a high alcohol mouthwash can cause serious side effects such as seizures and brain damage, in a toddler.



Dr. Peter Gott

several organizations, including the American Academy of pediatrics, have petitioned the Consumer Product Safety Commission to require child resistant packaging for all mouthwashes that contain more than 5 percent alcohol.

Thank you for writing to point out that yet another ubiquitous household substance can be a threat if it gets into the wrong hands. Incidentally, children who ingest such products should be seen by a physician.

To give you more information, I am sending you a free copy of my new Health Report "Heart Disease." Other readers who would like a copy should & \$1.25 plus a long self addresses, stamped envelope to P.O. Box 2433, New York, NY 10163. Be sure to mention the title.

**Mouthwash danger.** High-alcohol mouthwashes may raise a person's risk of developing oral cancer by as much as 60%. *Danger threshold:* Mouthwashes with an alcohol content of 25% or higher (as indicated on their labels) have been implicated in mouth, tongue and throat cancers. Theory: Alcohol acts as a solvent in the mouth, making tissues more vulnerable to carcinogens.

Research by the by the National Cancer, reported in *Working Mother*, 230 Park Ave., New York 10169

# Toothpastes may pose health risks

BY DR. WARREN SCHERER

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Some of the toothpastes and tooth whiteners that promise pearly white teeth may, in fact, hold possible health risks for consumers.

They could alter the chemistry of the oral cavity or be abrasive to the teeth and gums.

The public is cautioned against excessive use of products containing "dioforms," which are abrasive substances that can cause the breakdown of tooth enamel.

Products containing the ingredients silica and cellulose, in particular, should be avoided when gum disease, tooth decay, sensitivity and receding gums are present.

While these ingredients can remove tartar and make teeth whiter in appearance, they also may do harm to dental health by altering the acidic balance of the mouth, gums and tongue.

Some tooth care products found in health food stores also can lull consumers into a false sense of security.

Because these products do not contain chemicals or preservatives, consumers tend to believe they are necessarily beneficial.

But many of these health store toothpastes omit fluoride, which helps fight cavities, and are also high in sodium, which in excess can contribute to high blood pressure and other diseases.

Other products which may be detrimental to oral health can be found in ethnic supply stores.

These include products manufactured in India that use a red tint designed to make the gums appear healthier by providing a sharp contrast to the color of the teeth.

Consumers are advised to judge the oral health safety of a product by looking for American Dental Association certification, and to avoid all non-ADA endorsed products claiming dramatic results.

Along with being mindful about their toothpaste, consumers also should be careful about the type of toothbrush used.

Recent studies have shown that soft-bristle toothbrushes are more efficient than their hard-bristle counterparts for proper dental hygiene, last just as long as the hard-bristle variety, and also are better tolerated by gum tissues.

Using a hard-bristle brush can cause bleeding of the gums despite the apparent absence of periodontal disease.

(Dr. Warren Scherer is an associate professor of restorative and prosthodontic sciences at New York University College of Dentistry.)

## HORIZONS

# Mouthwashes pose hazard to children

Scripps Howard News Service

The effort to prevent children from being poisoned by mouthwashes that contain alcohol is gaining momentum.

A petition calling attention to the danger of alcohol-containing mouthwashes has been filed with the Consumer Product Safety Commission by the attorneys general of 27 states and several medical and health organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Opponents of the mouthwashes point out that 10,000 children under age 6 have been poisoned by them during the past five years. They note one ounce of mouthwash with a large amount of alcohol can cause seizures, brain damage and comas in small children, and five ounces can be fatal.

## ORAL HYGIENE RISKY

People tend to assume that if a product appears on the supermarket shelves, it is totally safe, having been thoroughly checked out by the appropriate government regulatory agencies. Time and again, however, that assumption has proven incorrect. Here are some examples related to oral hygiene products:

- After adjusting for the possible variables of alcohol and tobacco consumption, cancer researchers found that the risk of oral cancer was 40% higher in male mouthwash users, and 60% higher in female users. The risk was found only for mouthwashes with high alcohol content.

\*A Canadian professor of gastroenterology believes that swallowing toothpaste could lead to Crohn's disease. Animal studies on the subject resulted in the discovery of enteric lesions, thus indicating that a toothpaste-disease link may be possible for humans. Because children tend to swallow toothpaste.

Spectrum Consumer Products Co., Houston, was quick to take advantage of the National Cancer Institute report linking high alcohol content liquid mouthwashes with increased risk of cancer in the oral cavity. Reason: the company had already marketed an alcohol-free, "dry" mouthwash in which surfactants take the place of alcohol as a solvent. Called Spritz, the product uses technology covered by two U.S. patents (4,919,918 and 4,971,785) and 15 foreign patents pending. It is in limited distribution in Texas and is also sold directly by mail. The company points out that most national brands of mouthwash contain between 10 and 27 percent alcohol.

# HEALTH AND BENEFIT NOTES

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**Can toothpaste contribute to canker sores?** Sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS) is the detergent found in most toothpastes. But research from Oslo, Norway indicates SLS may precipitate canker sores in people already prone to get them. Oral surgeon Paul Barkvoll found a 70 percent **decrease** in occurrence of canker sores when susceptible persons switched to a toothpaste that did not contain SLS. Barkvoll suspects the ingredient dries out the protective mucous layer lining the mouth, leaving the gums and cheeks vulnerable to irritants like acids in foods. Until recently, the only U.S.-marketed toothpaste without SLS was Rembrandt's Natural. But others are now following suit.