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How Clean Is Your Toothpaste?



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

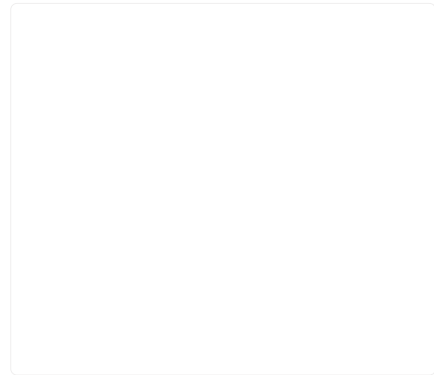
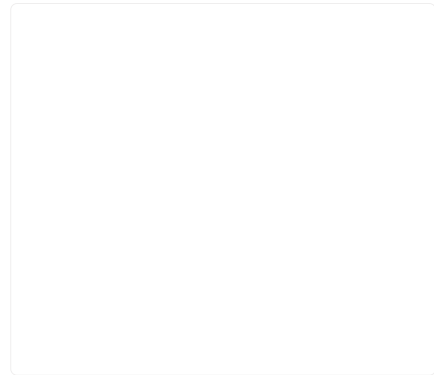
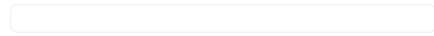
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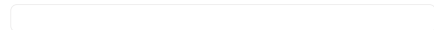
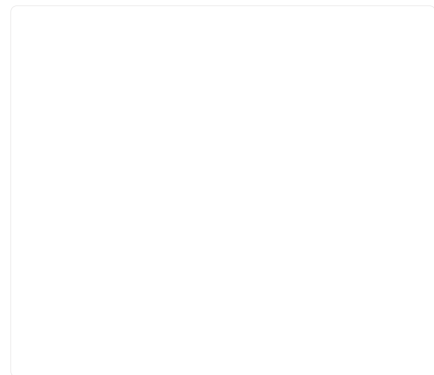
Nobody wants the things they use for cleaning to poison them or pollute the planet. But for the attention we pay to [household cleaners](#) and [personal care products](#), toothpaste tends to be overlooked. Maybe we check for the American Dental Association seal, but most of the time the deciding factor is taste. But considering that toothpaste is a cleaner we actually put in our mouths, maybe we should take a closer look.

Toothpaste, a History

The [history of oral hygiene](#) dates back nearly 7,000 years to an abrasive powder made from materials like eggshells, pumice



[Westlake Home - Luxury Organic Bedding](#)



stone, or ox hoof ashes. Egyptians would wet the powder and rub it on their teeth. Later the Romans and Chinese sought to improve the flavor of their abrasive powders with herbal ingredients like mint and ginseng. Not much changed until the 1800s, when inventors added soap and chalk to the powder.

The first toothpaste tube – made of lead – was introduced in the 1890s. This was the first of many changes that would follow in the 20th century, as a host of new chemicals were introduced that both increased the effectiveness and environmental and health risks of toothpaste. In 1955, Proctor and Gamble released the first stannous fluoride cavity-preventing toothpaste. This is still the most common active ingredient in toothpaste today.

DIY Dental

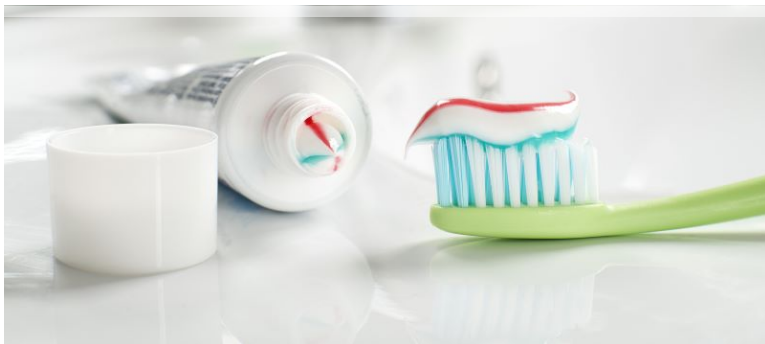
Personal care products of all kinds were largely homemade until the last century, and that is still an option today. You can [make your own](#) toothpaste and [mouthwash](#) at home using safe, natural ingredients you already have in your kitchen. However, you should talk to your dentist before giving up stannous fluoride, which is proven to deter cavities.

Troublesome Ingredients

We only use about [20 gallons](#) of toothpaste over our entire lifetimes (about the amount of [water for a single shower](#)) but toothpaste can contain numerous [troublesome ingredients](#) with potential health effects. Common sulfates like sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS) are not actually linked to cancer as rumored, but can be a [skin irritant](#) to people with sensitivities. SLS has been linked to [canker sores](#) when used in toothpaste. Dentists recommend brands with fluoride, but many people prefer to avoid it, especially if their water is already fluoridated. Look for [Environmental Working Group \(EWG\) Verified](#) toothpaste for the safest options.

Some ingredients also have environmental concerns. The phosphate in [sodium pyrophosphate](#) , which prevents tartar build-up, can pass through wastewater treatment to contribute to algal blooms and subsequent dead zones in natural waterways. Few products advertise themselves as phosphate-free, but phosphates are not ubiquitous in toothpaste; even some name brands like [Crest](#) offer toothpastes without them.





Are there troublesome ingredients in your favorite brand of toothpaste?

Animal Welfare

It may come as a surprise that some toothpastes may include animal products. Propolis is sourced from bees. Unless specified otherwise, calcium phosphate and glycerin can be made from the bones and fat of animals. If you don't want to brush your teeth with animal fat, look for [vegan certified](#) products like [WITH MY Lemonade](#) or [Truthpaste](#).

Even toothpastes that do not contain animal products may have been tested on animals. To avoid them, look for [Leaping Bunny certified](#) products like [Hello](#) or [JASON](#). Proving that vegan and cruelty-free are not identical, [Burt's Bees Purely White](#) toothpaste is Leaping Bunny certified.

Packaging

Toothbrushes and toothpaste tubes [can be recycled](#), but it's not as simple as throwing them in your curbside recycling bin. Most toothpaste tubes are made from multi-layer plastic that local recycling programs cannot process. But that may be changing; [Tom's of Maine](#), [Colgate](#), and [other brands](#) are transitioning to a recyclable plastic tube. And in 2022, [Poppits](#) will launch a line of toothpaste pods. Instead of using tubes, they will package individual pods covered in biodegradable, food-grade film in aluminum tins. Other options for avoiding toothpaste tubes is tooth powder such as Eco-Dent's [DailyCare](#), or EWG-Verified [HAPPY](#). You can also try a toothpaste tablet, such as WELdental [Chewtab](#).

Brush Well

There are a handful of brands that address many of the concerns around toothpaste at once. [Davids](#) toothpaste is EWG-Verified; sulfate and phosphate-free; packaged in a metal tube; and both vegan and cruelty-free. [Dr. Bronner's All-One](#) toothpaste is organic, sulfate- and fluoride-free, and Leaping Bunny certified.

Whichever toothpaste you make or buy, don't use more than you need. Covering the entire brush with a squirt of toothpaste as shown in commercials is wasteful. If everyone only used a [pea-sized amount](#), as recommended, we would fall far short of the 20-gallon lifetime average. It should go without saying by now that running the tap while you brush is a bad idea. Even with a low flow faucet, leaving the water running consumes [four gallons](#) of fresh water every time you brush.

But whatever you do, don't give up or even cut down on brushing. Bad breath makes it harder to spread the environmental message, and you don't want to have to calculate the environmental costs of dental fillings.

advertising



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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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