

A Fresh Clean Look at the Kashrus Status of Toothpaste

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Imagine you are invited to a luncheon where a tube of toothpaste is the scrumptious main course. While this is (hopefully) only a bad dream, the question of whether, according to Jewish Law, toothpaste is considered a food is subject to debate, with the understandable deduction that if it is a food – it would need to be kosher. There are some Rabbis who hold that no matter how hard the companies try to make toothpaste palatable – because it's used in a place where we have all our taste buds – it is never considered a food since the definition of food according to Jewish Law is something that one eats and would feed to others. Since you'd never consider feeding someone a toothpaste-like food for lunch, it's considered inedible and doesn't require kosher certification. Other Rabbis hold that as long as the item is something that one can swallow with relative ease – this would “edible”.

However, for the longest time, even those Rabbis who accepted the latter opinion which views toothpaste as being a food item were generally not concerned with the kosher status of toothpaste. To understand why, we need to delve into this familiar minty morning matter.

Toothpaste cleans your teeth because it contains an abrasive that literally scrapes the residue off of your teeth. To make this abrasive less repulsive and even somewhat palatable, the companies mix in other ingredients. Examples of these other ingredients would be sorbitol (a sweetener), glycerin (which provides sweetness, smoothness, and keeps the toothpaste moist) and flavors. From a kosher perspective, the most sensitive of these ingredients is clearly glycerin, which can come either from animal fat or vegetable oil.

For years, the abrasive used in toothpaste was calcium carbonate – otherwise known as chalk – which is clearly not edible. Since the majority of the toothpaste was an inedible item, the legendary Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky ruled that the toothpaste would remain kosher even if the glycerin used was not kosher. He reasoned that the rules of the kosher concept of “*ta'am k'ikar*” – which say that any non-kosher ingredient which affects the taste of the food, causes the whole food to become forbidden – only apply to “foods”, and therefore even if the paste contains 30% glycerin it may be used as more than 50% of it is inedible calcium carbonate.

However, if you take a trip to your local pharmacy and read the ingredient panel of dozens of varieties of toothpaste, you would be surprised to see that almost none of them have calcium carbonate in them! What happened? It seems that at some point in recent years, calcium carbonate was replaced with hydrated silica (a sand product) as the abrasive, and that has had repercussions for the logic mentioned above, for the following reason:

It is well known that ingredients are listed in descending order of weight, which means that the ingredients used in the greatest quantities are listed earlier. [A few toothpastes

don't follow this rule and list the ingredients alphabetically]. The ingredient panel of most toothpastes list hydrated silica as the 2nd, 3rd or even 4th ingredient which is a sure sign that the first few ingredients are the majority of the toothpaste. Those ingredients – water, glycerin and sorbitol – are regular food ingredients, and in fact, the inedible hydrated silica is usually just about 20 percent of the toothpaste these days. Now that we have established that the majority of toothpaste is not an inedible, non-food item (i.e. hydrated silica) but rather a food item (water, glycerin, sorbitol, etc.), several contemporary Rabbis (including the renowned Rabbi Yisroel Belsky) hold that Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky's line of reasoning no longer applies today.

Please remember that the change from calcium carbonate to hydrated silica appears to be relatively recent. [Actually, the modern toothpaste industry is relatively 'new', and not so long ago people brushed their teeth with their fingers or twigs using all kinds of dry, rough things as an abrasive – like crushed eggshells, ashes of the burnt hooves or heads of animals, mashed fish bones, etc.]. Therefore, we can well understand that our parents and grandparents may have used toothpaste without examining its kosher status, but the same may not apply to us. In truth, this rule applies to all of kosher food, where the fact that a previous generation did differently than we do today, is usually directly related to some new way that the industry produces that food.

In summary, some hold toothpaste is inedible and doesn't require kosher certification, while others hold it is edible. Within this latter opinion, there used to be basis for being lenient since the toothpaste contained more than 50% inedible ingredients, but that is no longer true.

Clearly this is a question to pose to your local Rabbi. His decision on the above issues will lead him to recommend one of the following choices (listed in order of strictness):

- 1) Only buy toothpaste with reliable kosher certification.
- 2) Review the ingredient panel and only buy the toothpastes that do not contain any glycerin.
- 3) Choose the ones that have the glycerin listed towards the end of the ingredient panel.
- 4) Buy any brand and type, based on the opinion that doesn't consider toothpaste a food item.