

Does It Work?

Activated Charcoal

BY STEPHANIE ANDERSON WITMER

Activated charcoal is the ingredient of the moment, and products that contain it—black toothpaste and bath bombs, even supposedly better-for-you gray-hued ice cream—are being touted as wellness must-haves. Charcoal is “activated” when heated to high temps, making it more porous, and it is said to trap harmful substances in or on your body, preventing their absorption. Activated charcoal has long been used to filter water and treat poisonings and drug overdoses in the ER. What’s new are companies’ broader claims, such as that it clears acne, detoxifies the body, whitens teeth, and controls odors. Here, experts separate truth from hype.

BEAUTY PRODUCTS

WHERE YOU’LL SEE IT: In “detoxifying” masks, cleansers, shampoos, and soaps as well as toothpastes.

WHAT WE KNOW: “There’s not much research on activated

charcoal in skincare,” says Rajani Katta, M.D., a dermatologist in Texas. It is abrasive, however, so it may work to exfoliate. As for toothpaste, a review in the *Journal of the American Dental Association* found no evidence that charcoal toothpastes were effective; in fact, they may damage enamel, discoloring teeth.

SHOULD YOU TRY IT? If you really want to. “Unless you have sensitive skin, it probably won’t harm you,” Dr. Katta says. “Still, you’re better off choosing products with proven effective ingredients.”

BRANDS: Pantene, Garnier, and Origins have charcoal beauty products (\$5 to \$30). Colgate and Desert Essence make toothpastes that contain it (\$6 to \$20).

WELLNESS ITEMS

WHERE YOU’LL SEE IT: In underarm deodorants and shoe insoles that claim to squash smelliness, salves for bug bites, and charcoal-lined bandages, which, the companies that make them say, speed healing and mask wound odors.



GETTY IMAGES.

WHAT WE KNOW: Research substantiates its odor-controlling abilities, but avoid deodorants made with charcoal and essential oils if you have sensitive skin. No research shows that activated charcoal calms itchy bug bites, but studies show that charcoal wound dressings may reduce odor and promote healing by drawing out fluid and toxins.

SHOULD YOU TRY IT? Yes, depending on your issue. It may de-stink your armpits or sneakers, but ask your doctor before using charcoal bandages.

BRANDS: PiperWai makes a deodorant (\$12 to \$17). Charcoal House sells a salve (\$12). Dr. Scholl's and Odor Eaters make shoe insoles (\$6 to \$19). CarboFlex and

ins from the body," says Kristen Smith, M.S., R.D., a dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. There's no evidence that it can treat hangovers or lower cholesterol; findings on whether it eases GI issues are preliminary and mixed.

SHOULD YOU TRY IT? Probably not, says Smith. "Activated charcoal binds to toxic substances when you're poisoned," she says, "so it can also bind to things you don't want to remove, like nutrients."

BRANDS: Pressed Juicery and Dirty Lemon charcoal juices (\$6 to \$8), Nature's Way and Nature's Bounty capsules (\$6 to \$7), and powders online and in health-food stores (\$5 to \$20).

Zorflex are two of many brands of bandages (\$70 and up).

FOOD & DRINK

WHERE YOU'LL SEE IT:

In burger buns, ice cream, cocktails, coffee, and juices, or as capsules or powders. Products claim to detoxify, cure hangovers, and even lower cholesterol or alleviate GI discomfort.

WHAT WE KNOW:

Activated charcoal is useful for acute poisoning, but "science doesn't show that it removes general tox-