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Seeing RED

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THE NEW SUPERFOOD?

Can **activated charcoal** make you look and feel better? Experts weigh in.

BY SUZANNE PFEFFERLE TAFUR

CHARCOAL IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUMMER BARBECUES. But is it also the key to clear skin, whiter teeth and relief after a night of revelry? Some people are betting the answer is yes.

Activated charcoal, which is different from charcoal briquettes used for grilling burgers, is one of the latest health and beauty trends appearing in the national media and taking over Instagram feeds. The substance is sold in the form of health supplements, facial cleansers and even toothpastes.

This type of charcoal — sometimes made by burning coconut shells — is extremely porous and reportedly traps toxins before the body absorbs them. Medical professionals use the substance to treat acute poisoning and drug overdoses.

But manufacturers are marketing activated charcoal supplements to the public, claiming they are a natural remedy for all sorts of ailments, including high cholesterol, stomach discomfort and even hangovers.

Becky Caracci, a certified health coach, is skeptical.

"(Manufacturers) basically don't have to prove that their supplement is safe, or that it's even effective, for it to go on the market," Caracci says, explaining that these supplements are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. "The only way that a supplement is pulled from the market is if it has been proven to harm someone."

As for whether activated charcoal can ward off a hangover, Caracci says it only works during the hour immediately after taking the supplement, and it doesn't even bind to alcohol. And the charcoal may soak up "good things," such as nutrients.

"Frankly, there's no evidence that it's effective in doing the things they claim it does," Caracci says. "You can't really trust that (the supplements) are being regulated by the government as safely as most of our medications are being regulated. Just because it's on the shelf does not mean that it is safe for you."

Caracci says the best way to avoid alcohol-induced aches and pains is by eating before you begin sipping cocktails and by drinking plenty of water.

"Dehydration is really what you're feeling the next day," Caracci says. For relief, she recommends over-the-counter remedies, such as Pepto-Bismol and Ibuprofen.



» ABOUT FACE

FACIAL EXFOLIATORS CONTAINING ACTIVATED CHARCOAL also are gaining popularity due to reports that they can eliminate blackheads and remove impurities from the skin.

"Activated charcoal works by a principle of adsorption," says dermatologist **Dr. Mary P. Lupo**. "Basically what that means is that it binds toxins, dirt and oil for extrusion."

Lupo says activated charcoal masks and

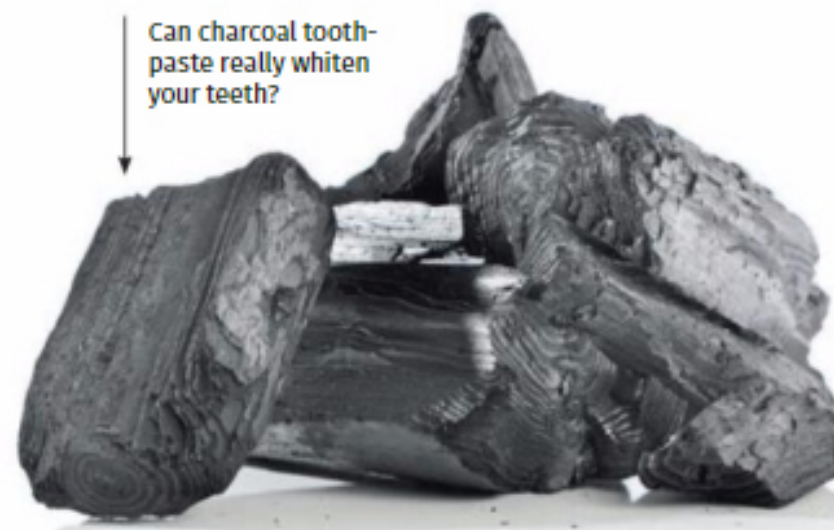
cleansers are safe and effective for all skin types. She notes, however, that activated charcoal can dry out skin, and should be used only once or twice a week.

Also, exfoliators and scrubs — with and without activated charcoal — should never be used on "active inflammatory skin conditions," such as rosacea. Lupo suggests first applying a thin layer of the product to a small area of the face.

"Do a little test spot to make sure that you're not going to have any irritation," she says.



Activated Charcoal Body and Face Scrub, \$14.99 for 10 ounces at BrooklynBotany.com.



She recommends Brooklyn Botany's charcoal scrub.

"That seems to be reasonably priced and well-tolerated," Lupo says. "It has some additional oils to keep it from drying your skin out too much."

» SAY "AHHH!"

CHARCOAL ALSO IS TRENDING IN ORAL CARE.

Brushing your pearly whites with black toothpaste may seem counterproductive, but would you use activated charcoal for a brighter smile?

"The most requested procedure from patients is whitening," says **Dr. Ryan Thibodaux**, dentist and owner of Storyville Dentistry. "It's on the top of everyone's list."

Although many of his patients ask about activated charcoal, only a few have tried it. One patient says her teeth were even more stained after using the product. She was startled when she spat dark sludge into her ivory sink.

"It freaked her out a little bit," Thibodaux says. "She came into the office to have her teeth professionally polished, to get rid of the residue from the black powder."

That's not to say everyone who uses activated charcoal toothpaste or powder has had a bad experience. But Thibodaux says he doesn't know of anyone who has had a good one.

"You don't really see a lot of people within the dental community talking about it," he says. "The charcoal pastes and products haven't really gotten to that point where there's been any significant studies about the effectiveness. I've just heard patient testimonials."

Thibodaux recommends toothpaste with an agreeable flavor and approval from the American Dental Association. "It's up to the consumer to be especially critical" of new and trendy products, he says.

"I would be very skeptical of any product that you're directly marketed to," Thibodaux says. "Use your best judgment and be skeptical." □