

Quick Reference

Should Toothbrushes Carry Warning Labels?

A suburban Chicago man, Mark Trimarco, thinks they should, and he has filed a class-action lawsuit against eight toothbrush manufacturers and the American Dental Association in an attempt to force the issue.

The suit, filed in April of 1999, is seeking damages on behalf of anyone who suffers from a condition known as "toothbrush abrasion," which is characterized by gum irritation, gum recession, and tooth sensitivity. It is caused in part by brushing too aggressively, incorrectly, or with medium- or hard-bristled toothbrushes.

However, the litigants maintain that even soft toothbrushes are capable of inflicting damage on your gums if used improperly.

The lawsuit claims that, because of their potential to cause toothbrush abrasion, toothbrushes are "unsafe and unreasonably dangerous" and should carry package warnings and instructions for safe use.

Michael Applebaum, Trimarco's attorney, said dentists have been aware of toothbrush abrasion for nearly half a century. The ADA countered that toothbrush abrasion is associated with several behaviors in addition to improper brushing, such as eating acidic foods and consumption of citrus drinks and carbonated beverages.

The suit names the ADA because its "Seal of Acceptance" can be found on medium- and firm-bristled toothbrushes, which most dentists say are too rough on your gums.

"If a toothbrush is used properly, toothbrush abrasion is not an issue," said ADA President S. Timothy Rose in an April 12 ADA press release. "To allege that the seal in some way causes harm to consumers is nonsensical."

"There are no allegations that the ADA seal itself causes harm to anyone," countered the litigants in their response to the ADA's press release. "People use toothbrushes the best they can," they say, but, "if, in fact, a substantial number of people injure themselves trying to do the right thing, then it is arguably legitimate to call into question the safety of this particular device."

"The ADA's Seal of Acceptance Program has been in existence for nearly 70 years . . . the seal helps prevent inferior products from falling into consumers' hands because they are tested thoroughly to make sure they meet the seal's rigorous standards," Rose said.

Lawsuit proponents maintain that medium- and firm-bristled toothbrushes are in fact "inferior products" that most dentists discourage their patients from using, yet most carry the ADA's seal.

The ADA recommends gentle brushing using only toothbrushes with soft, polished bristles. Look on the package for the word "soft" or "extra soft," and avoid toothbrushes that are described as "medium" or "firm."