

What is beeswax on sweets?

From the sweeties.net wiki

Beeswax is the wax that honey bees make to build their honeycomb. Food makers use a little of it as a glazing agent, a very thin coating that gives sweets a shine and helps stop them losing moisture. On an ingredients list it appears as beeswax or by its E number, E901.

How bees make it

Worker bees make wax in eight glands on the underside of the abdomen. The glands produce tiny scales of wax about three millimetres across and a tenth of a millimetre thick, and it takes about 1,100 of them to make a single gram. The hive must be warm, between 33 and 36 degrees Celsius, for the bees to make wax at all. The bees use it to build the cells of the comb, where they store honey and protect their young.

Making wax costs the bees a lot of honey. Nobody has measured it accurately, but an experiment in 1946 found that 6.66 to 8.80 kilograms of honey produced one kilogram of wax. New wax is as clear as glass. It turns opaque once the bees chew it, and yellow or brown as pollen oils and propolis get mixed in.

Beekeepers collect wax from the cappings cut off the comb when honey is harvested, and from old or unwanted comb. It is melted and cleaned, and for food and cosmetics it is purified, and sometimes bleached to make white beeswax.

What it does on sweets

As a food additive, beeswax is used in small quantities as a glazing agent, which helps prevent water loss, and to protect the surface of some fruit. The same idea is used on cheese, where a coat of beeswax seals out the air and stops mould. Beeswax is also used in the coatings of some tablets and soft capsules, and it is a common ingredient of natural chewing gum.

On sweets it can be used together with other glazes. Jelly Belly, for example, uses shellac and beeswax to give its jelly beans their final buff and polish.

Can you digest it?

Beeswax is edible, with negligible toxicity, like plant waxes, and it is approved for food use in the European Union and most other countries. But the human gut cannot break it down properly, so it has no real nutritional value. A few creatures can digest it: honeyguide birds can, and beeswax is the main diet of wax moth caterpillars.

Is it vegetarian or vegan?

Beeswax is made by bees rather than from them, and vegetarian diets usually accept bee products such as honey. Vegans do not. The Vegan Society's first manifesto, published in 1944, said the diet should exclude honey, and beeswax, shellac and cochineal are all common additives made by or from insects that vegans avoid.

If you want vegan sweets, check the glaze as well as the gelling agent. Carnauba wax, from a Brazilian palm, is a plant based glaze: see [what is carnauba wax on sweets?](#) and [what sweets are vegan in the UK?](#)

An ancient material

Beeswax has been used since prehistory. It has been called the first plastic, and people have used it for candles, for polishing wood and leather, for waterproofing, in casting metal and glass, and in painting. It was used to make early phonograph cylinders, and it is still used to seal some formal documents.

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