

What is shellac on sweets?

From the sweeties.net wiki

Shellac is a natural resin secreted by a tiny insect, the lac bug. It is used as a finish for wood, but it is also edible, and food makers use it as a glaze on pills and sweets. On an ingredients list it appears as shellac or by its E number, E904. When it is used on sweets it is also called confectioner's glaze, pure food glaze or natural glaze.

Where it comes from

The female lac bug, *Kerria lacca*, lives on trees in the forests of India and Thailand. As it moves along the branches sucking the sap, it secretes a resin that forms a hard tube around it. People scrape this resin, called sticklac, off the bark. It is heated in canvas tubes over a fire so that the resin melts and seeps out, leaving the bark and the insects behind, and then it is dried into flakes. Estimates of how many lac bugs it takes to make a kilogram of shellac range from 50,000 to 300,000.

The name comes from shell and lac. Lac is linked to lakh, the Indian word for 100,000, which probably refers to the huge numbers of insects that swarm on the host trees.

Why it is on sweets

Shellac dries to a hard, high gloss finish and is an excellent barrier against moisture. To make confectioner's glaze, food grade shellac is dissolved in alcohol. The glaze used for sweets contains roughly 35 per cent shellac, and the rest evaporates after the glaze is applied. It can be sprayed in a fine mist onto smooth sweets such as chocolate coated peanuts. Shellac is also used to help citrus fruit and apples keep, and on coffee beans and chewing gum.

In the United States, sweets glazed with shellac include candy corn and Jelly Belly jelly beans, which are finished with shellac and beeswax. In the European Union it is approved for use on chocolate products, other confectionery and chewing gum, among other foods.

Is it safe?

Shellac is an approved food additive. In 2024 the European Food Safety Authority completed a new review of it. It set an acceptable daily intake of 4 milligrams per kilogram of body weight a day for wax free shellac made by physical decolouring, and concluded that the way shellac is used in food does not indicate a safety concern. In the United States it is generally recognised as safe. Because a shellac coating does not dissolve in stomach acid, it is also used on some medicines that are meant to release slowly.

Why vegans avoid it

Shellac comes from an insect, and making it can kill many insects, so vegans avoid it. A plant based alternative is zein, a protein from maize, which is used as a coating on sweets, nuts, fruit and pills. Carnauba wax, from a Brazilian palm, is another plant based glaze: see [what is carnauba wax on sweets?](#)

The lac bug belongs to the same superfamily as the cochineal insect, which gives us the red colour carmine: see [what is carmine?](#)

From French polish to 78s

Shellac has a long history outside the sweet shop. From the 19th century it was one of the main wood finishes in the western world, until lacquers largely replaced it in the 1920s and 1930s, and it is still the basis of the traditional French polish used on fine furniture, pianos and string instruments. Gramophone records, the 78s, were made of shellac until vinyl took over.

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