

History of the toothbrush

This is one chapter of the Encyclopedia of the History of Dentistry.

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Abstract

Cleaning one's teeth goes back to ancient Babylonians, Indians, and Egyptians. They used a special pointed stick as a cleaning instrument.

Keywords: toothbrush, dental floss, dentifrice, halitosis, miswak, mouthwash, oral hygiene, toothpaste, toothpick

Cleaning one's teeth goes back to ancient Babylonians, Indians, and Egyptians. They used a special pointed stick as a cleaning instrument. Made of a twig from the arak or licorice tree, the chewing stick, known as "miswaak", became widely adopted in Africa, the Middle East, India, and the Far East (1).

The origin of the modern toothbrush appears in the 13th c. A Japanese Zen master in 1223 described Chinese monks using a toothbrush made of horsehair attached to a bamboo or bone handle. The toothbrush we recognize today was invented in China at the end of the 15th Century (2). In Europe, the toothbrush may have been introduced to France in 1590 by Antonio Perez, secretary of King Philip II of Spain. In 1780 an Englishman, William Addis of Clerkenwell, created the prototype of a multi-row toothbrush using a bone handle and rows of holes filled with wild boar tufts of hair as bristles. With the industrial revolution, the demand for improved oral hygiene also grew. Charles F. Maury, a French dentist, in 1828 displays several toothbrushes in his book (3) (see image). In the 100 years following the first toothbrush patent in 1857, the US issued 618 patents (4). The first mass-produced toothbrushes had horse or wild boar hair bristles with bone, wood, or ivory handles. In 1938 DuPont mass-commercialized a toothbrush made entirely of plastic.

The first electric toothbrush was patented in 1932 by Clement Lieux of Lafayette, LA. It was a battery-operated rotary brush with interchangeable brushes. The modern electric toothbrush was invented in 1954 by Phillip Wong of Switzerland under Broxodent. The next advance, the cordless electric toothbrush with a rechargeable battery, was introduced in 1955 by General Electric.

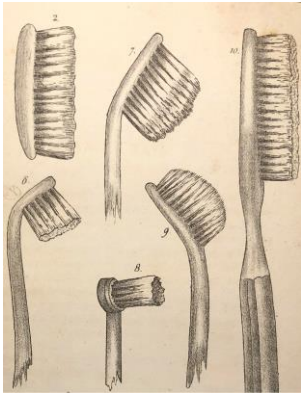


Figure. An illustration from the 1828 *Traité complet de l'art du dentiste*, by J.C.F. Maury. The characteristic shape of the toothbrush was already established.

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