

History of the toothpick

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

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Abstract

The oldest oral hygiene tool is the toothpick.

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The oldest oral hygiene tool is the toothpick. The earliest forms of toothpick, during the Neanderthal and Paleolithic periods, were made of bone or wood (1, 2). Toothpicks have a rich history, alone or combined with an ear scoop and *dental scraper*, made of a quill, wood, ivory, bamboo, iron, bronze, copper, silver, or gold. These tools were often attached as a “grooming set” for personal use; the earliest grooming set dates from 3000 BCE Mesopotamia (3).

In ancient Greece and Rome, the *mastic tree* that gave rise to the early toothbrush (*miswak*) was used to fashion wooden toothpicks. In addition to wood, feather or silver toothpicks were also employed. Feathers were used both as toothpicks and toothbrushes (4). The Latin name for toothpick was *dentiscalpia* (-um), and it was first defined in a 16th-century lexicon of Johannes Gorraeus (5).

In the 16th century, toothpicks became fashionable jewelry to demonstrate social status. They were part of a richly decorated wearable grooming set. (Figure). It contained a toothpick, an ear pick, a nail cleaner, and sometimes a head-scratcher.

The Industrial Revolution increased demand, producing wooden toothpicks primarily at Larvao Monastery, south of Porto, Portugal. The nuns used orange wood toothpicks to serve sticky confectionary, which after meals served as toothpicks. Orange-wood hand-made toothpicks were imported from Brazil to Portugal. In 1850, a Bostonian, Charles Foster, started mass production of wooden toothpicks made of the birch tree in Strong, Maine, US, a city that in 1945 still produced 75 billion toothpicks. Today, toothpicks are no longer favored by the oral healthcare community due to their potential damage to *periodontal tissue*. Instead, *dental floss*, regular *toothbrushing*, and *professional cleaning* took over.

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Figure. - Woman's belt-hangings, 18-19th Century, Newari/Tibetan personal grooming set. Includes: a tweezer, toothpick, nail-pick, ear-scoop, and tongue scraper. Metropolitan Museum of Art - John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1915. (Image in the public domain - <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39471>)

<http://www.kaleidoscopehistory.hu>

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