

Fun Dental History Facts

Dental products have come a long way through the years...from hog bristle toothbrushes to electric toothbrushes. We hope you find the following dental history and tips interesting and helpful. You'll see that Queen Elizabeth I and George Washington learned the hard way that daily oral health habits are important for a healthy smile.



George Washington suffered from poor dental health. He wore dentures because he had most of his teeth extracted.

Fun facts about your smile and teeth

- It seems children have the right idea about smiling...they smile about 400 times a day.
- Women smile about 62 times a day compared to men who smile eight times a day on average.
- Each person's set of teeth is unique much like their fingerprints. Even identical twins do not have exactly the same set of teeth. Did you know that your tongue print is also unique?
- Does the hand you write with affect your teeth? It can. Right-handed people, tend to chew food on their right side, while left-handed people tend to chew on their left side.

Dental products and their origins

Toothbrush

The first people to use a toothbrush were the Hindus of India who used the end of a fresh twig, which was frayed into fibers, in 4000 B.C. The Babylonians in 3500 B.C. called their toothbrush a "chewing stick." A toothbrush made of hog bristles was used in China in 1600. In 1780, William Addis of England invented a brush used to clean teeth. The handle was made from cattle bone and the bristles were from swine.

The first toothbrush, as we know it today, was invented in 1857 by an American named H.N. Wadsworth followed by a patented three-row toothbrush of serrated bristles with larger tufts created by Dr. Meyer Rhein. The next phase of toothbrushes replaced the swine bristles with synthetic bristles. It wasn't until 1938 that nylon brushes with plastic handles were invented. The nylon bristles were less abrasive to the teeth and gums. Daily tooth brushing habits were not talked about as a public health issue until the end of World War II. Most toothbrushes today have more than 25,000 bristles in 40 groups of tufts. The electric toothbrush is now another alternative, which was produced in the United States in 1960.

Toothpaste

Dental toothpaste has been used since 500 B.C. in China and India. In 1824, a dentist named Dr. Peabody actually added soap to toothpaste. Many compounds were added to toothpaste, like chalk and flavors, during the 1850s. In 1892, Dr. Washington Sheffield created the collapsible tube dispenser. After World War II, other agents were used -ultimately resulting in the addition of fluoride.

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Dental Floss

Dental floss-like substances have been found in the teeth of early pre-humans and American Indians. Dental floss made from a thin thread of silk, was first invented in 1815 by a New Orleans dentist named Levi Spear Parmly. Floss was not manufactured using unwaxed silk floss until 1882 by the Codman and Shurtleff Company in Randolph, Massachusetts. In 1896, Johnson & Johnson Company released dental floss made from silk surgical sutures.

After World War II, a medical doctor named Dr. Charles Bass thought that nylon had advantages over silk floss, which was prone to shredding. Nylon had a greater resistance, could be produced in bigger quantities, and could have diameters that are consistent. Dental floss remains a critical component for good oral health today.

Ancient beliefs about what causes tooth decay

There are several ancient theories about the cause of tooth decay. Queen Elizabeth I was known to have discolored teeth. Paul Henter, a German traveler, believed that her discoloration might have been caused from the excessive consumption of sugar. Before 1960, Americans believed that a tooth worm, which either had appeared spontaneously or had bored its way into the tooth, caused the stabbing pain of a toothache. If the tooth pain was severe, it meant that the worm was thrashing around. But if the aching stopped, then the worm was at rest. Cultures all over the world held on to the notion of the tooth worm, even though many of the cultures had no contact with each other.

The folklore of the tooth worm persisted from ancient times to the beginning of the 18th century. It wasn't until 1960 that Dr. Paul Keyes discovered that tooth decay was actually caused primarily by bacteria known as Streptococcus Mutans.

The father of our country had poor oral health

George Washington also suffered from poor dental health. He wore dentures because he had most of his teeth extracted. He suffered from toothaches all his adult life, and it is believed that his quick temper may have been the result of this dental pain. By the time Washington became president of the United States in 1790, he only had one tooth, his lower left bicuspid (a tooth that has two cusps and is located between the canine and molar teeth). When his dentures were made, this tooth was made to show through a hole in his lower denture.

When President Washington sat for his inaugural painting, the artist, Gilbert Stuart, thought that his dentures were too short, making his cheeks and lips look sunken. He padded Washington's mouth with cotton attempting to restore the natural lines of his face. This technique did not work; instead he looked puffy in his portrait.

While these are fun facts about dental health that will give you something to smile about, we certainly know that oral health is more than just fun and games. We know more today about taking good care of our teeth and gums. Practicing good dental health habits can foster a healthy smile for a lifetime.

Sources: American Dental Association, Toothbrush Express, Dentalxchange, "Toothworms and Spider Juice: An Illustrated History of Dentistry" by Loretta Frances, Ichord, Millerbrook Press.

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oral health
information,
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Web site at
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