

# Why is chewing gum banned in Singapore?

From the sweeties.net wiki

Singapore is famous for being spotless, and its chewing gum law is a big part of the legend. Here is the real story.

## The problem

In 1983, a government minister brought the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, a proposal to ban chewing gum. It was causing trouble in the city's high rise public housing: vandals were putting used gum in letterboxes, keyholes and on lift buttons, and gum on floors, stairs and pavements was pushing up cleaning costs and damaging cleaning machines. Lee thought a ban would be too drastic.

## The trains

Then, in 1987, Singapore opened its new Mass Rapid Transit railway, at the time the largest public project the country had ever built, costing \$5bn. Vandals began sticking chewing gum on the sensors of the train doors, stopping them working and disrupting services. It did not happen often, but when it did it was costly, and the culprits were hard to catch.

On 30 December 1991 the government announced that chewing gum would be banned from 3 January 1992.

## What the ban covers

Imports of gum stopped immediately. After a short period for shops to clear their stock, selling gum was banned outright, with fines of up to S\$2,000 for anyone convicted of selling it, and fines or prison for importers. Remaining stocks were confiscated.

What the law does not do is ban chewing. It is not illegal to chew gum in Singapore, and according to BBC News, travellers may bring in a small amount for their own use. Spitting gum out in the wrong place, though, can get you fined.

## The caning myth

In the 1990s Singapore's laws got a lot of international attention, especially after an American teenager was sentenced to caning in 1994 for vandalism, which involved spray paint, not gum. Confused reporting led to the myth that chewing gum itself could get you caned. It cannot: the penalties for illegal gum are fines and prison.

When a BBC reporter suggested that laws like this would stifle people's creativity, Lee Kuan Yew replied that if you cannot think because you cannot chew, you should try a banana.

## Did it work?

By most accounts, yes. After the ban, town councils reported far less gum litter, and gum no longer jammed lift doors or disrupted trains. Singapore's pavements are, perhaps uniquely among modern cities, free of gum. Compare that with London: a study in 2000 counted around a quarter of a million blobs of gum on Oxford Street alone. See [why chewing gum is so hard to get off pavements](#).

## The Wrigley exception

The ban was softened in 2004. The American gum giant Wrigley lobbied to get chewing gum onto the agenda of a free trade agreement between the United States and Singapore. Singapore agreed to allow therapeutic, dental and nicotine gum, sold only by a pharmacist or dentist, who must keep a record of buyers' names. Ordinary gum is still banned. For the story of the company behind it, see [William Wrigley Jr and the chewing gum empire](#).

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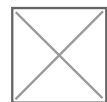
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