

The history of chewing gum

From the sweeties.net wiki

Chewing is an old habit. Long before anyone sold a packet of gum, people all over the world were chewing tree resins, saps and tars, apparently independently of each other.

Stone Age gum

The oldest known chewing gum is about 5,000 years old. It was made from birch bark tar and found at Kierikki in Finland, and it still has tooth marks in it. The tar is thought to have had antiseptic properties, so it may have been chewed for health as well as for the habit.

Chicle: the gum of the Maya and Aztecs

In Central America, the Maya and Aztecs chewed chicle, a natural latex collected from Manilkara trees. Collectors, called chicleros, cut zigzag gashes in the bark and gathered the sap as it dripped out, much as rubber is tapped, then boiled it until thick. People chewed it to stave off hunger, freshen their breath and keep their teeth clean, and the Maya even used it to fill cavities. The word chicle may come from the Nahuatl word tzictli, meaning sticky stuff.

Spruce gum in New England

In North America, Native Americans chewed resin from spruce trees, and European settlers in New England picked up the habit. In 1848 John B. Curtis made and sold the first commercial chewing gum, The State of Maine Pure Spruce Gum. Gums made from paraffin wax followed.

The failed rubber that became gum

Modern chewing gum began with an accident. In the 1860s, the former Mexican president General Antonio López de Santa Anna brought chicle to New York and gave it to Thomas Adams to try as a substitute for rubber. It did not work as rubber. But cut into strips and sold as chewing gum, it did: Adams New York Chewing Gum went on sale in 1871.

Flavours followed. A pharmacist in Louisville, Kentucky, John Colgan, made the first flavoured gum in the 1860s, Taffy Tolu. Black Jack gum, flavoured with liquorice, arrived in 1884, then Chiclets in 1899 and Wrigley's Spearmint. American soldiers in the Second World War were given gum in their rations and traded it with local people, and it became a global habit. The man who turned it into an empire is in [William Wrigley Jr and the chewing gum empire](#).

From trees to petroleum

For decades, chicle was the heart of gum. But when Guatemala passed a land reform law in 1952, Wrigley, the only buyer of Guatemalan chicle, stopped buying it. By the 1960s most gum makers had switched to cheaper synthetic gum bases, and today most gum is made from petroleum based polymers. Only a handful of small companies still use chicle. See [is chewing gum made of plastic?](#).

Bubble gum

Bubble gum needed a stronger, stretchier base. The breakthrough came from an unlikely inventor, an accountant, in 1928: see [Walter Diemer, the accountant who invented bubble gum](#).

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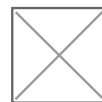
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