

Why do the British call them sweets?

From the sweeties.net wiki

In Britain, sweets are sweets. In America, they are candy. The difference is not an accident of slang: it comes from two old words that went their separate ways on either side of the Atlantic.

Sweets comes from sweetmeats

Sweets is short for sweetmeats. A sweetmeat is a sweet delicacy or confection, and the word goes back to the Old English swete mete. The meat in it does not mean flesh: in this old compound, meat means food, so a sweetmeat was simply a sweet food.

The noun sweet has a long history of its own. The Online Etymology Dictionary dates sweet in the sense of something sweet to the taste to around 1300, and a sweet food or drink to around 1400. Sweetie, the word still used in Scotland, is recorded from 1721, and sweet in the sense of a single sweet, like a drop, from 1851. Today dictionaries define a sweet as a confection made from sugar, or high in sugar, with the word used especially in the UK.

Candy meant crystallised sugar

Candy is old in English too, but it started out meaning something narrower. It arrived in the late 13th century as sugre candi, crystallised sugar, from the Old French çucre candi. Behind that lie the Arabic qandi, the Persian qand, meaning cane sugar, and probably the Sanskrit khanda, a piece of sugar.

Over the following centuries the meaning of candy broadened, especially in the United States, until by the late 19th century it meant any confection with sugar as its basis. In Britain that broadening did not take hold. As the Online Etymology Dictionary puts it, in Britain these are sweets, and candy tends to be kept for sweets made only from boiled sugar and striped in bright colours.

Sweets across the English speaking world

Sweets is also the usual word in Ireland and a number of other countries, while Australians and New Zealanders say lollies and Americans and Canadians say candy: see [what is the difference between sweets and candy?](#) Within Britain, the regional words run from sweeties in Scotland to kets in the North East: see [what people call sweets around Britain](#)

Candy still hiding in British English

The older sense of candy never quite left Britain. It survives in names such as candy floss, candy cane and rock candy, the last a hard sweet of large sugar crystals first recorded in 1723, which is very close to candy's original meaning of crystallised sugar.

Earn rewards on sweeties.net

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



sweeties.net · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@sweeties.net · 3-click cancel at sweeties.net/cancel/