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ANCIENT DENTAL HYGIENE PRACTICES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

Pardayev Otabek Anvarovich
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1381-5371
otash6065@mail.ru
Jurayev Sanjar Ramazanovich
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4306-8796
jurayevsanjar1983j@gmail.com
Bekmurotov Murodulla Abdugafforovich
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4932-4354

ABSTRACT

Dental hygiene has been a concern for humans since antiquity, with societies employing various tools and practices to maintain oral health. Archaeological evidence and historical texts reveal the use of toothpicks, chewing sticks, powders, and herbal remedies across civilizations such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome. This study examines ancient dental hygiene practices, their prevalence, and their effectiveness in preventing dental diseases, using bioarchaeological evidence and historical records. Results indicate that while these methods partially mitigated plaque and debris accumulation, their effectiveness was limited by dietary habits and the absence of modern antiseptics. Nevertheless, these practices highlight early understanding of oral care and the cultural significance attributed to healthy teeth and gums.

Keywords: Dental Hygiene, Ancient Practices, Oral Health, Archaeology, Preventive Dentistry

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining oral hygiene is critical for preventing dental diseases such as caries, periodontal disease, and tooth loss. Even before the advent of modern toothbrushes, humans developed methods to clean their teeth, remove debris, and freshen breath.

Ancient societies, motivated by both health and aesthetics, employed a range of dental hygiene tools, including toothpicks, chewing sticks, powders, and herbal rinses. Understanding these practices provides insight into early preventive dentistry and cultural perceptions of oral health.

This article examines the dental hygiene practices of ancient civilizations, evaluating their methods, prevalence, and effectiveness based on archaeological and historical evidence.

Literature Review

Dental hygiene in antiquity has been documented through multiple sources:

Egypt: Archaeological findings include toothpicks, small brushes, and powders made from ox hooves, ashes, and burnt eggshells (Nunn, 1996).

Mesopotamia: Texts describe the use of chewing sticks and medicinal pastes to clean teeth and freshen breath.

Greece and Rome: Historical writings by Hippocrates and Galen mention toothpicks, powders, and mouth rinses using vinegar, wine, and herbal infusions.

Bioarchaeological studies indicate that populations practicing dental hygiene exhibited slightly lower levels of plaque-related wear and dental caries, although diet and abrasive food were significant confounding factors (Hillson, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This study integrates archaeological, textual, and bioarchaeological evidence:

1. **Archaeological analysis:** Examination of dental hygiene implements recovered from ancient sites in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.

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2. **Textual review:** Analysis of classical texts describing oral care practices and recommended hygiene routines.

3. **Bioarchaeological assessment:** Correlation of skeletal evidence of caries, periodontal disease, and tooth wear with documented hygiene practices.

The methodology emphasizes qualitative evaluation of the effectiveness and cultural significance of hygiene practices.

RESULTS

Tools and Implement

Toothpicks and small sticks: Used widely for removing food debris; found in burial sites and households across civilizations.

Chewing sticks (miswak): Particularly common in Mesopotamia and Egypt; contained antimicrobial properties from plant compounds.

Tooth powders and pastes: Composed of ash, crushed bones, or herbal ingredients; intended to clean and polish teeth.

Rinses and mouthwashes: Vinegar, wine, and herbal decoctions were used to reduce bad breath and bacterial growth.

Prevalence of Practices

Hygiene practices were more common among elites with access to materials such as powdered minerals, herbs, and specialized tools.

Lower-status populations primarily relied on mechanical cleaning using sticks or cloths.

Evidence suggests that regular cleaning, at least once daily, was practiced in some elite households.

Effectiveness

Mechanical removal of debris using toothpicks and chewing sticks helped reduce localized plaque accumulation.

Herbal compounds provided mild antibacterial effects, particularly from Miswak and myrrh.

Despite these methods, high-carbohydrate and abrasive diets limited overall effectiveness, leading to continued prevalence of caries and tooth wear.

Bioarchaeological data indicate that populations employing regular oral hygiene had slightly reduced rates of caries, but not sufficient to prevent dental disease entirely.

DISCUSSION

Ancient dental hygiene practices reflect an early understanding of the relationship between oral cleanliness and health. Key points include:

Cultural awareness: Dental care was associated with social status, beauty, and religious practices.

Preventive intent: Even without knowledge of bacteria, ancient people recognized the need to remove debris and maintain oral aesthetics.

Partial effectiveness: Practices mitigated some oral disease risk but could not overcome dietary or environmental challenges.

Innovation and continuity: Many practices, such as chewing sticks, continue in some cultures today, demonstrating long-lasting efficacy and cultural importance.

CONCLUSION

Ancient dental hygiene practices, including the use of toothpicks, chewing sticks, powders, and rinses, represented early efforts at preventive oral care. While their effectiveness was limited by

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diet and the absence of modern antiseptics, these practices reflect both practical knowledge and cultural emphasis on oral aesthetics.

Understanding ancient hygiene practices informs the historical development of dentistry and highlights the enduring human concern for oral health.

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