

The Misswak

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Man has been through all ages a lover oh beauty. The Arab's love of beauty finds expression in his literature and poetry. His sweetheart had teeth comparable only to a string of pearls.

With the onset of civilization and the varied menu introduced into his diet, he began to have trouble with his teeth and so he went back to Nature in search of ways and means for combatting this trouble. Learning that food remains must be removed from between his teeth, he started to use toothpicks mainly Khilals - made from the peduncle of several types of ammiaceae which have a pleasant taste from aromatic flavours such as anise, caraway or dill. This did not accomplish the desired effect. Again he went back to Nature for aid and it provided him with the misswak, an aromatic root of the small bush - Arrak-tree (*Salvadora persica* L. tooth-brush tree) which grows wild in the desert. When rubbed against the teeth its root fibers stand out like the bristles of a modern tooth-brush, which it excels in several ways. Besides cleaning the teeth and giving them a nice shiny appearance it has a very agreeable taste which causes an increase in flow of the saliva. Moreover, it is easy to get and costs practically nothing, while no paste, powder or liquid dentrifice is required to be used with it.

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A toothbrush is not supposed to be used more than a period of time; in the case of the miswak it is impossible to use the same bristles more than a few times. The fibres get very soft and the slightly bitter taste is lost. All that has to be done is to cut off these bristles and use the freshly cut end and so on until the miswak is completely used up. This was the common practice of the Arabs in the Pagan Period, i. e., the period before Islam.



Although the Prophet (Mohammad) was an ardent believer in the use of the miswak and employed it conscientiously five times a day, he did not make its use a duty that ought to be done, but a duty that is left to the discretion of the person - miswak was the only toothbrush available at its time 570 A.D. - 633 A. D.

He is known to have said «If I wanted to make it more difficult for my people, I would have ordered them to use the miswak and the perfume», and also said «Garlic and onion are two abominable trees». He was contented to have his people clean their mouths thoroughly using water as a mouthwash with the help of the forefinger of the right hand when the miswak was not available.

According to Ibn Abdin (a Moslem theologian of the last century) the miswak is to be applied in 1. When teeth become yellowish - 2. When the taste of the mouth changes - 3. After getting up from bed (any time) - 4. Before praying - 5. Before ablution. First to the buccal surfaces of the upper and the lower teeth, proceeding

from right to left. The lingual surfaces are cleaned in a similar manner. Thereupon the miswak is to be guided into all the interdental spaces and finally the tongue is to be brushed lightly to remove the superficial deposit. It should be selected of moderate thickness not more than half an inch in diameter and before application it has to be soaked in plain water for about 24 hours until all fibers separate. The removed outer skin of the end going to be used, should not exceed half an inch so that it retains its rigidity when cleaning the teeth.



The structure of this plant is extremely fibrous and contains sodium bicarbonate (sodium bicarbonate is recommended by the Council on Dental Therapeutics of the A. D. A. to be used alone as a dentrifice) which protects it from micro-organisms (germs) usually invading the ordinary toothbrush, certain astringents are found also, i. e., Tannic Acid, which helps against the infections of the gums.

Miswak can be used as a pacifier which can prevent two oral habits: 1. Smoking (and cigars in particular for the similarity in size) and 2. thumb sucking.

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