Dear Alice,

When was the first dildo invented and what was it originally used for?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Dildos have a big... long... (wink wink) history that dates back thousands of years. The first dildo, discovered in a German cave, was thought to have been used by people during the Ice Age — 28,000 years ago! Since then, dildos reappeared consistently in cultures and societies across the world, and it’s been a source of anxiety, pleasure, and controversy throughout.

Ancient civilizations used a number of different objects as dildos and vibrators. One of the early civilizations to experiment with dildos was ancient Egypt. Egyptian paintings from 3,000 BCE show women wearing large phallic objects around their waists to pay tribute to the god Osiris. On top of that, legend has it that in 50 BCE, Queen Cleopatra filled a hollow gourd with bees, causing it to vibrate, and allegedly creating the first vibrator! In ancient Greece, people enjoyed using olisboi, which were stuffed phalluses made of polished leather. Back in those days, olive oil wasn’t just a staple of the Greek diet — it doubled as the best lube available. The Greeks believed that a lack of sperm caused hysteria or a wandering uterus, so Greek men who left home for long periods of time to fight in wars often gave their wives olisbos to prevent hysteria (the link between hysteria and sex toys would last well into the 20th century and play a role in the invention of vibrators, as well). Other ancient texts from around the world, including the Arabian Nights, mention fruit, vegetables, and other penis-shaped objects being used for sexual stimulation and fulfillment. Italians provided the word diletto, meaning “to delight,” from which the modern English word "dildo" evolved. By the time of the Renaissance, its creation had become an art form. Members of the upper classes had dildos custom made from silver, ivory, and other precious materials.

Later in history, in 17th century England, men were fearful of the threat that these ever-firm phalluses posed to their own sexual prowess, and a number of laws were passed to prohibit women making them for themselves and others. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, wrote a poem titled Signior Dildo [2], which touched on these fears by implying that the women of England were
turning away from men, towards dildos. On the other hand, Japan showed a very different relationship to dildos during the same period in their erotic novels, known as shunga. In them, dildos weren't treated as threatening penis-replacers but instead were depicted more playfully. There are shunga that show women shopping for, masturbating with, or sitting in rooms decorated with dildos.

Information on early American dildo use is scarce, partially due to the Comstock Laws in the 1800s, which banned the sale of rubber dilators (which had previously largely been sold as medical devices). Despite these laws, however, sex toys were sold through an underground market. As in England, American men were concerned and threatened by dildos. In the 1930s and 40s, comics came out that included dildo use, but communicated the message that sex with men was superior. Ironically, despite this dildo-driven anxiety, vibrators buzzed by without any controversy, largely due to the fact that they were marketed as non-sexual.

The sexual revolution in the 1960s opened up the idea that masturbation was acceptable and normal, and dildos began to take on a new meaning as a tool for women’s sexual liberation from men. In the 1970s, Dell Williams and Betty Dodson responded to the fact that most dildos were produced by men by creating their own sex toys. They popularized the idea that dildos don’t have to look like penises, and they introduced the smooth, colorful, silicone aesthetic that’s still popular with many sex toys today. With the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, the dildo was seen as a way to have penetrative sex without risking infection, but consequently was pegged with a stigma that linked dildo use to HIV infection. Dildos have also played (and continue to play) a key role in allowing for gender play and sexual exploration. Strap on dildos give people of all genders the option of having a phallus and being penetrated with one and it challenges the belief that someone needs to have been assigned male at birth to have a penis.

Today, there are a seemingly unlimited array of materials to choose from when selecting dildos (not to mention sizes, shapes, and even vibrations). Both brick and mortar and online stores, such as Babeland [3] offer a wide variety of toys, and great information about how to use them. Toys have continued to evolve, so going into a store to learn more about the options such as what kinds of lube to use with them, how they’re powered (be it battery, plug in, etc.), and what materials they like may be a useful endeavor for people seeking them out. As sex toys come more into the mainstream, devices of today and tomorrow will add to a rich history of pleasure seeking.

Alice!
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