

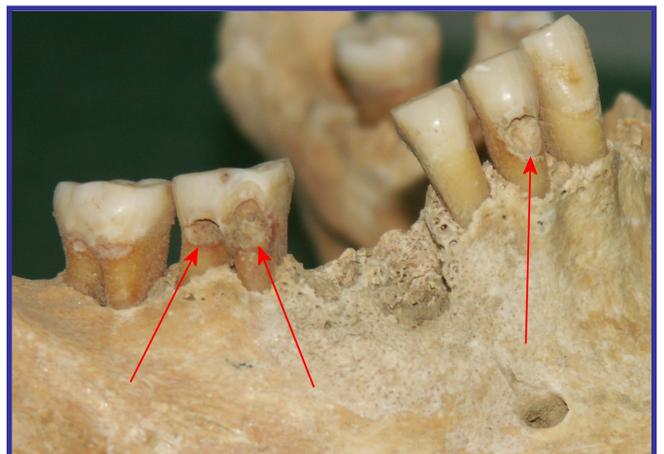


• Learn about ... •

Caries – Ancient plague of humankind *

• Peter Caselitz •

Humans are all too often haunted by their decayed teeth. Caries is not the largest plague of humankind, but certainly a daily nuisance. Caries is a very ancient and most widely spread disease. It already existed in the Australopithecines of South Africa as well as in the Homo erectus species from Java/Indonesia. In the Neanderthals of Mount Carmel/Palestine caries is as common as in French upper paleolithic humans. Caries is not limited to humans. Modern apes are affected as well as Pliocene animals and Pleistocene mammals.





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According to current scientific knowledge, the rate of caries increased notably with the shift from hunters and gathers to farmers in Neolithic times when food became rich in carbohydrate. A common opinion in the literature is that in “primitive” tribes caries occurs less often than in “acculturated” societies. The rise of culture seems to bring an increase in tooth decay. Transferred into a historical dimension this would indicate a low caries rate in the hunters and gatherers of the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods and higher caries rates from Neolithic times onwards, when food become more refined and sophisticated, up to the still high caries frequency in present day urban populations. Caries is the result of the interdependence of oral chemical balance due to bacterial infection (especially with sorts of streptococcus), dietary habits and oral hygiene as well as a certain mild influence of genetic predisposition. Caries is well related to social conditions and it appears possible to obtain background information concerning culture from the study of teeth. ■

* A text from: Kurt W. Alt, Friedrich W. Rösing, Maria Teschler-Nicola. *Dental Anthropology: Fundamentals, Limits and Prospects*. Springer; 2003.