

# The history of candy canes and why they taste so cool

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Candy canes are an iconic symbol of Christmas. Their red and white stripes adorn trees and homes during the holidays while their minty flavor delights taste buds.

According to the National Confectionery Association, a U.S.-based

group that advocates for the confectionery industry, candy canes are the [No. 1](#) selling non-chocolate candy in the month of December—90 percent are sold between U.S. Thanksgiving and Christmas.

But how did this beloved holiday treat become associated with Christmas? Not to mention why do candy canes make your mouth feel cold? As someone who has researched chocolate and confectioneries, I thought it fitting to answer some important candy questions this holiday season.

## A Christmas legend

There's some mystery surrounding the origins of candy canes because there are no exact records of their invention. One well-regarded story suggests that in 1670, a choirmaster in Cologne, Germany, gave out sugar sticks to the children as a way to soothe them during the long nativity ceremony.

The choirmaster asked a local candy maker for the sugar sticks to be turned into a hook so they [resemble the shape of a shepherd's staff](#). Shepherds are common symbols in the Christian faith and can be seen in the Christian story of the birth of Christ.

An alternative theory suggests the hook was invented simply to make the [candy sticks easier to hang](#) on Christmas trees.

These, however, are folktales with little evidence to back them up. The first documented case of candy canes occurred in 1847 when a German-Swedish immigrant named August Imgard of Wooster, Ohio, decorated a small blue spruce tree with the candy.

## Peppermint medicine and candy

Even the iconic flavor of candy canes is full of mystery as no one knows who first created [peppermint](#) confections.

[Peppermint](#) is a strong smelling hybrid plant, a cross between a watermint and spearmint. Peppermint is one of the world's oldest medicinal herbs used to treat stomach-related illnesses such as indigestion and nausea, in both eastern and western medicine.

During the 18th century, [candies were medicinal](#), meaning that your local apothecary was also your candy maker. That's because the medicinal ingredients that were prescribed were usually unpalatable concoctions of herbs.

To help get the patient to consume the unpleasant medicine, chemists would suspend the herbs in sugar. Peppermint was often added to these sugar mixtures because its cooling taste helped to mask the flavor of awful-tasting drugs. The [peppermint Altoids](#) was invented in 1781 by the London confectioner Smith & Company, which also made medicinal lozenges.

It wasn't until the 19th century that the apothecary and candy maker started to become separate professions. After the U.S. Civil War, the price of sugar fell, opening the door to the rise of candy. By the mid-19th century peppermints had become a popular European candy. However, it is still unclear as to the exact person who first developed the idea.

The first mention (at least in the United States) of peppermint flavored sugar sticks also appeared in the 19th century. A cookbook written in 1844 and titled [The Complete Confectioner, Pastry-cook and Baker](#) included instructions on how to make peppermint candy sticks.

## **Red and white stripes**

One thing that is certain is that the red and white stripes on a candy cane are a modern invention.

Candy canes were originally solid white, but during the turn of the 20th century stripes started to appear. Prior to the late 19th century, Christmas cards of that period show nothing but plain white candy.

Some believe the stripes came from the candy maker Bob McCormack in the 1920s. The McCormack company became the leading peppermint candy cane producer during the late 1950s. By the end of the 1950s his company was producing [1.8 millions sticks of candy each day and had national sales of US\\$3.3 million](#). Through their invention of a machine known as the Keller Machine, automation increased their production of candy canes from thousands per day to millions.

## Misleading menthol

Most people love peppermint candy canes for the refreshing, cool taste it leaves in their mouths. Peppermint oil and extracts, primarily the essential oil menthol, are used to flavor candy canes. [Menthol is an alcohol](#) known for its waxy, crystalline appearance and is responsible for the cooling sensation of mint.

We perceive mint as cold because menthol activates a specific receptor found in the sensory neurons of the skin and mouth. When menthol connects with an [ion channel called TRPM8](#), it sends an electrical signal along the length of the neuron.

Normally, the TRPM8 receptor is [activated by cold temperatures](#) such as icy water or a slushy. Menthol, however, is able to bind with the TRPM8 protein triggering it in the same way that something cold would. When TRPM8 detects menthol, the receptor sends the signal to the brain that

something cold is in the mouth.

If you don't care for minty candy canes, don't worry, you're still in luck. Candy manufacturers also make [candy](#) canes in a variety of other flavors and colors.

[Pickle](#), anyone?

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