

Sacbee: Lifestyle/Scene

## Pucker up

### As Valentine's Day approaches, here's what you have to know about kissing

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Some cultures in Africa and the Himalayas don't believe in it. Eskimos and some in the Asia Pacific don't do it the same way you do it.

And 40 percent of American women believe they are so good at it, they're "unforgettable."

It's first base. Locking lips. Snogging. Mashing.

Whatever you call it, kissing is largely universal, with 90 percent of the world's population engaging in some form of it.

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While there are different kisses - greeting kisses, show-of-respect kisses, familial kisses and passionate kisses - kissing has become as ingrained in our lives as breathing.

"Kissing can be a bonding ritual," says Robin Hicks, an anthropology professor at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind. "The human species is kind of wired that way - humans need other humans."

Americans spend an average of two weeks of their lives kissing; the average woman will kiss 79 guys before marriage; and a man who kisses his lady goodbye before leaving for work generally has a higher income than the guy who doesn't, according to Andréa Demirjian's "Kissing: Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About One of Life's Sweetest Pleasures" (Perigee Books, \$9.95 paperback, 240 pages).

And in the book's survey, when people were asked which they'd give up - kissing or sex - 63 percent said sex, 21 percent would give up kissing and 16 percent said the question was too hard to answer.

"A kiss is really about that intimate connection between two people that no one else can share. It gives you the feeling of closeness, feeling cared for and cherished," Demirjian says.

"That's what a kiss does when we're kissed as a child by our loved ones - it makes us feel safe. And as an adult, it's the same way as well as a whole host of other things, like being desired and feeling attractive."

#### Kissing through the ages

Although no one knows exactly how the act of smooching began, there are various theories dating back to the era of the caveman.

The lip-lock could have stemmed from cave mothers passing their already-chewed food to the mouths of their babies, or it might have been the natural evolution from

sucking on a mother's breast for nourishment, according to Demirjian's book.

Demirjian actually believes a third hypothesis - kissing is a derivative of cavemen smelling the breath of their prospective cave women.

"There is a theory that cavemen would smell the saliva of women to see if they're healthy," she says. "I can't imagine their breath was fresh, but they probably did eat very simple diets."

The first documented records of kissing date back to Vedic Sanskrit texts of India in 1500 B.C., according to Vaughn M. Bryant, an anthropology professor at Texas A&M University.

When Alexander the Great's army conquered parts of northern India in 326 B.C., they learned about kissing and then spread the practice of swapping spit wherever they went - the Middle Eastern countries of Persia, Syria and Assyria, and then to Greece and Rome, Bryant says.

The Romans embraced kissing and started many of the traditions that are still intact today: kissing at the altar and kissing the rings of officials and leaders.

Roman men also began the practice of kissing their wives when they returned home for the day, but not because they were glad to see them; they wanted to check if their

ladies were drinking wine while they were away, Demirjian says.

"They wanted to taste their wives' lips to make sure they weren't drinking the vats of homemade wine all day," she says. "This custom we think is sweet and almost perfunctory was to make sure she had been behaving herself."

### **Keep that kisser to yourself**

Not everyone believes puckering up is a sweet and tender act.

"Some cultures in the Himalayas don't kiss at all - saliva has a lot of bacteria so they think it's very dirty," says Demirjian. "And there are some cultures in Africa who don't kiss on the mouth because the mouth is the portal to the soul, so someone who kisses you can take your soul, capture your soul, or invite in germs and death."

There also are restrictions on kissing in more traditional countries, such as India, Malaysia and Pakistan, with fines and possible jail time for planting one on each other in public places.

In Indonesia, lawmakers are in a two-year debate process considering a law jailing public canoodlers for up to 10 years and fining them as much as \$33,000, according to BBC News.

"It's a very cultural thing," says anthropology professor Bryant. "It means different things in different cultures."

Indeed, some cultures in the Asia Pacific don't believe in the meeting of the lips; they instead sniff each other's cheeks, noses and necks, often referred to as "the Eskimo kiss."

They likely knew a person's individual scent is secreted by glands that are largest and most numerous in that region, Bryant says in his lectures.

### **Kissing to your health**

In the United States, where kissing is widely accepted as a gesture of love, giving each other sugar has health benefits along with the emotional ones.

The lower half of the face is one of the most sensitive areas of the body, according to the book, "Kiss & Tell: A Trivial Study of Smooching," (Quirk Books, \$14.95, 128 pages) by Kevin Dwyer.

The lips and tongue are the home of nerve endings wired to the brain so that during a snog session, the brain releases endorphins, according to Dwyer's book.

Although 278 colonies of bacteria are exchanged in a luscious lip-lock, the good can outweigh the bad, says Demirjian.

Besides raising self-esteem, kissing can prevent cavities and tooth decay because the increased saliva washes away plaque, according to her book. It also reduces stress, anxiety and blood pressure, while at the same time, boosts the immune system by heightening the oxytocin levels in the body.

Plus, when you share saliva you work 34 facial muscles, slowing the aging process because you're toning the jaw and cheek muscles, Demirjian's book contends.

Add that to the two to six calories you're burning each minute, compared with the 11 calories on the treadmill, and kissing can be downright wholesome.

"It's great for you," Demirjian says. "I just feel that you should really embrace it, enjoy it and never regret it. If there's a guy you want to kiss, carpe kiss - seize the kiss."

"Even if it goes nowhere, at least you've kissed him."