

## Featured folklore – Toothache Cures

Charms and folk remedies to heal an aching tooth appear regularly in the folklore of dentistry. One frequently recorded cure for toothache is to perform a ritual intended to transfer the pain of your aching tooth to another object – often a tree or rock, a nail, the ground, or even another person! The rituals range from simple techniques – one such remedy states “in order to cure toothache cut your finger nails on Friday”<sup>1</sup> – to more complex and exacting prescriptions. In his 1926 article [The Folklore of the Teeth \(IX\): The Transference of Toothache](#), Leo Kanner cites the following toothache cure from Brandenburg, Germany:



Figure 1 – illustration from Cottrell & Company promotional leaflet, ‘Dental Folklore,’ promoting Acrylucent acrylic teeth.

“One takes a mouthful of salt and goes with it in the evening silently, without greeting or addressing anyone, to the churchyard. There one makes a small hole over the last grave, crosses two blades of straw over the hole and spits the salt upon it. Then the hole is closed with mud, and the patient goes back home as silently as he came. The toothache will disappear and never come back again.”<sup>2</sup>

The requirement that such rituals be performed ‘in silence’ or ‘without being seen’ recurs in many similar cures. Joseph Carter, in [Folk Dentistry: Cultural Evolution of Folk Remedies for Toothache](#), suggests that this requirement for secrecy is based upon an ancient belief that words and sight hold power, and words spoken at the wrong time have the power to break a spell.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, B.R. Townend proposes it may be “a relic of the idea ... that if an enemy can obtain some portion of one’s body, finger nails, hair, teeth, saliva, excrement etc., by means of spells he can work harm on the original owner.”<sup>4</sup>

And should all of the above prove no match for your aching tooth, Kanner cites the following piece of humorous advice:

“Take a mouthful of cold water and sit on a hot stove until the water in your mouth begins to boil.  
You won’t feel any pain in your tooth by that time.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of American Folklore 1898 11 (41): 129-132. [Davenport GC. Folk Cures from Kansas.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Dental Cosmos 1926 (68): 1191-1198. [Kanner L. The Folklore of the Teeth \(IX\): The Transference of Toothache.](#)

<sup>3</sup> Carter JG, Carter WJ. [Folk Dentistry: Cultural Evolution of Folk Remedies for Toothache](#). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990

<sup>4</sup> Dental Magazine and Oral Topics 1938 55 (2): 126-132. Townend BR. Oral Magic Folklore and Tradition. 1: Magic.

<sup>5</sup> Kanner L. [Folklore of the Teeth](#). New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935.