

Surprising answers to life's little questions Ever Wonder Why...



...men's clothes have buttons on the right while women's are on the left?

It's easier for right-handed people, the majority, to push buttons on the right through holes on the left, and so men's buttons are on the right. When first used, buttons were expensive and worn primarily by the well-to-do. Women in that class were usually dressed by servants. Since a maid would face the woman she was dressing, dressmakers put the buttons on the maid's right - the woman's left.



...“getting the sack” means getting fired?

Mechanics and other workmen used to bring their own tools to the job. When a workman was let go, he was given his final pay packet - and a sack for his tools.



...the sky is blue?

When sunlight, which is a mixture of all the colours of the rainbow, passes through the earth's atmosphere, gas molecules and dust particles scatter its colours. Those colours with the shortest wavelengths are the most easily scattered. Since the shortest light waves appear blue, it's blue we see when we look at the sky.



...a zero score in tennis is called “love”?

In France, where lawn tennis first became popular, some people apparently thought a big zero on the scoreboard looked like an egg, and therefore called it *l'oeuf*. When tennis became popular in England, players copied the French and also called the zero *l'oeuf*, but pronounced it “love”.



...a bride always stands on the groom's left?

In days when men often captured their brides from neighbouring villages, a groom had to keep his sword hand, the right one, free during the ceremony to fend off a possible attack by the bride's kinsmen or jealous suitors.



...croissants are crescent-shaped?

In 1683, Austrians repelled the Ottoman Turks' attempt to occupy Vienna. To commemorate the victory, Viennese bakers created the croissant, shaped like the crescent in the Turkish flag.



...people clink glasses before a toast?

It was once thought the devil was ever present at festive occasions but could be repelled by the sound of bells. Revellers, therefore, would clink their glasses, producing bell-like noises to scare him away.



...ship portholes are round?

If portholes were designed with angles, the constant up-and-down motion of the ship would concentrate stress at those points and crack the vessel's skin. With round portholes the stress is evenly distributed.



...we play April Fool's Day jokes?

Until the latter part of the sixteenth century, the European new year began in late March and marked the beginning of spring. To celebrate the new year, festivities involving much gift-giving and party-going were held for several days, culminating on April 1. Then the King of France authorised a change in the calendar, moving the beginning of the new year to January 1. Many people who either didn't get word or simply refused to honour the change, continued to exchange gifts and hold parties on April 1. Because of this, they were called April fools and were mocked by others, who sent them frivolous presents and played tricks on them.



...an expensive but non-productive possession is a “white elephant”?

The King of Siam supposedly gave white elephants to members of his court he wished to ruin. The creatures were sacred and not allowed to work - yet they still had to be fed and cared for.



...something deliberately misleading is called a red herring?

The term stems from fox hunting: smelly, smoked red herrings were used to train dogs to follow a fox's scent and not be diverted by a false trail.



...when a woman spurns a man, she is said to be “giving him the cold shoulder”?

In the early nineteenth century, when the phrase was first recorded by Sir Walter Scott, it was customary for a hostess to serve hot meat to visitors who were welcome and cold meat to those who were not. Since the cold meat given to the unwanted guest was usually a shoulder of mutton, the hostess was said to be “giving him the cold shoulder”.



...we cross our fingers for good luck?

Early Christians secretly made the sign of the cross this way to ask for divine assistance without attracting the attention of pagans.



...most pencils are hexagonal?

Hexagonal pencils are cheaper to make than round ones. Nine hexagonal pencils can be produced from the same amount of wood needed for eight round ones. The hexagonal pencil is also less likely to roll off a desk.



...pretzels are made in a loose knot pattern?

Invented by medieval monks as rewards for children learning their holy lessons, pretzels were shaped to represent a pair of arms folded in prayer across a child's chest.



...it's bad luck to walk under a ladder?

A ladder leaning against a wall forms a triangle, the symbol of the Trinity and the mystic number three. It was once believed that to walk through the triangle would be to defy the Trinity and risk divine wrath.