

HISTORY OF ETHER NARCOSIS

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The use of ether as an anesthetic was heralded as one of the greatest advances in surgical technology to date. Its discovery is one that brought the alleviation of pain to millions, but bitter pain and jealousy to its discoverers. Before 1846, any surgical operation was literally an agonizing, terrifying ordeal - a living and many times, a dying hell, preparing a patient for surgery typically involved plying him or her with opium or alcohol to the point of almost passing out and then having 4 to 10 strong men strap and hold the patient down while the surgery was rapidly accomplished. This was always accompanied by excruciating pain. Surgeons became very adept at performing operations rapidly - excising a bladder stone in 45 seconds or amputating a leg in 1 to 2 minutes. They had to be fast because the patient could not withstand the pain of a lengthy procedure. Surgery was a universally dreaded, feared and agonizing experience - this all changed October 16, 1846. On October 16, 1846, William Morton arrived late to the operating theater at Massachusetts General Hospital. The small group of eminent surgeons and students were laughing at a scolding remark of Dr. Warren's criticizing Morton's tardiness when he rushed into the room short of breath after running up the stairs with ether which he named leoton and a new inhaler he had devised. Warren then said, "Well, sir, your patient's ready." The patient, Edward Gilbert Abbot, a thin pale man, had a bulging tumor of the jaw. Dr. Morton calmly explained to the patient what to expect and then had him breathe from the inhaler for several tense minutes. He then said to Dr. Warren, "Sir, your patient is prepared." Dr. Warren then dexterously and quickly excised the tumor from the jaw. There was no movement by the patient, only a slight wiggle and quiet gentle breathing as in a peaceful sleep. There was no shrieking by the patient, and there had been no need to strap the patient down or have several strong men hold him still for the surgery. The audience was silent, and with awe they were convinced. After the procedure Dr. Warren turned to the other surgeons and students, and with tears in his eyes, said, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug. The news of the discovery spread rapidly around the world, and within months ether was being used in Europe and all over the United States. Respected surgeons in Europe including [Liston](#), [Dieffenbach](#), [Pirogov](#), and [Syme](#), quickly undertook numerous operations with ether. Because of its associations with Boston, the use of ether became known as the "Yankee Dodge." It was once used in pharmaceuticals. A formulation of alcohol and mixture was known as "Spirit of ether" or Hoffman's drop. William Morton all the time seeking recognition and compensation for his discovery. In 1868, he had a nervous collapse after lobbying in Washington for compensation for his monumental discovery that had relieved so much suffering in the world. While in New York City, he jumped out of a moving buggy to plunge his head in a lake in Central Park. He was dragged out of the water unconscious and died in the hospital the next day. It is interesting, that Dr. Crawford Long of Jefferson, Georgia, had been using ether anesthesia for surgery in 1842, 4 years before Morton's public demonstration. He used it on several minor surgery cases over the next few years. He did not publicize his technique until others had done so.

The discovery of anesthesia opened the door for the rapid development of surgery. There are hundreds of different kinds of surgical procedures performed today which would not be possible without anesthesia.