But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why do we celebrate birthdays?

November 3, 2023

Jane 00:21
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you and we find answers. This week, we're focusing on a special date that comes around once per year, but on a different day for each of us. Almost all of us celebrate this special day. And while there's only one of these for you, you'll likely celebrate pretty frequently, especially if you have a big family or lots of friends. We're talking about birthdays!

Atlas 00:57
Why do people have birthdays?

Alex 01:00
My name is Alex. Why do we celebrate birthdays? Because my birthday is tomorrow!

Jane 01:07
Happy belated birthday, Alex! For that matter, happy belated or early birthday to every single one of you! Now, the way you celebrate your birthday might depend on where you live and on your family or household or cultural traditions. Sure, a lot of households have a cake or sing happy birthday or light candles or give the birthday person a present. But birthday celebrations are as different as each person on the planet. We asked you to tell us what you do for your birthday. And here's what a few of you told us.

Julius 01:38
Hi, I'm Julius. I'm 10 years old. I live in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. And on my birthday, I usually eat Vietnamese pho soup for dinner. And I try to convince my parents to let me stay home from school.

Ivy 01:52
My name is Ivy, I'm seven years old and I live in LA, California. My birthday tradition that me and my family share is we get to eat breakfast in bed. It could be cake or cereal.

Adrien 02:06
My name is Adrien. I'm 10 years old and I live in Colorado. My usual birthday tradition is listening to the song as Captain zoom, having pancakes, on the day of my birthday staying home and on my party we usually go to a place known as the Flip Side, a video game center.

Theo 02:28
Hi, I'm Theo and I live in Plymouth, Minnesota. I'm eight years old. And my birthday tradition is my parents hide my presents and I have to go on a scavenger hunt to find them. And for example, if I'm eight years old, then I get eight clues to find my presents. And at the end of the eight clues I get all my presents.

Henry 02:57
My name is Henry. I'm from Los Angeles, California. I'm four years old. And my birthday tradition is waking up and going downstairs and seeing surprise decorations.

Rowan 03:13
My name is Rowan. I live in Raleigh, North Carolina, and I am seven years old. My favorite birthday tradition is getting to take the day off from school and be with my family.

Rowan 03:27
I'm Landon and I'm eight years old. And I live in Manhattan. In China, if someone has a birthday, then we eat very long noodles. And that means the person who has the birthday can get a very long life.

Jane 03:48
I love those birthday traditions. I don't really have a birthday tradition like that. And now I'm thinking maybe I should start one. Now let's get into some of your questions.

Atlas 03:58
My name is Atlas. I'm six years old. And I live in Kelowna, Canada BC. Why do people have birthdays?

Grace 04:09
Hi, my name is Grace. And I live in Carrollton, Texas. I'm eight years old. And I wanted to ask, how do you turn older on your birthday?

Jane 04:22
We turn older on our birthday because that's what a birthday is. Your birth day is the day you were born. So while we say you have a birthday every year, it's really just the anniversary of your very first birthday. In many cultures, we keep track of that day each year as a way to mark time and to recognize that you've had a whole year of learning and growing. And although you're technically getting older every day, you turn over into a new year on that day of your birthday. So we say you move from eight to nine years old on that day.

May 04:55
Hi my name is May. I'm almost seven. I live in Natick, Massachusetts. Why do we celebrate birthdays?

Persephone 05:04
Hi, But Why. My name is Persephone. I'm seven years old. I live in England. Why do we have birthdays?

Owen 05:13
Thank you. Hi, my name is Owen. I live in Brooklyn, New York, and five years old. And my question is, why do you celebrate birthdays?

Alex 05:24

Hi, my name is Alex and I'm five years old. And I live in Blumenau, Santa Catarina, Brazil. And my question is, why do we celebrate birthdays?

Mae 05:39

Hello, my name is Mae. And I live in Chicago, Illinois. And I am 4 years old, and my question is why do everybody have birthdays?

Jane 05:54

So we’ve established what a birthday is. But why do we celebrate it? Well, the expectation that your birthday will be celebrated with a party is actually a pretty modern idea. Back hundreds of years ago and even further, only certain people’s birthdays would be acknowledged. The birthday of a famous citizen, like a king or a ruler, might be celebrated with a public holiday. And in some religions, the birthday of a spiritual leader will be marked with big celebrations as well. But the idea of celebrating birthdays for children likely started in Germany and spread to the United States in the 1800s. At first, these birthday celebrations were mostly just for wealthy families who had enough money to do something special. Often these family parties were quite formal, and they could be used as a way to teach kids, especially girls at the time, how to have proper manners and etiquette. (In those days they used to think girls, especially, needed to learn these things more than boys. Luckily, we’ve mostly lost that tradition.) In time, more families started celebrating birthdays, not just the rich families.

Jane 06:58

But it’s important to note here that birthday celebrations come in all shapes and sizes. And for some people, not celebrating is actually what they’d rather do. Not everyone wants a big party, and not everyone can afford one. And that’s okay. Especially if you live in North America, there can sometimes be pressure to prove you have lots of friends or can throw a really big great fancy party. And that’s just silly. The size of your party does not equal the size of the love that people have for you or your value in the world.

Jane 06:58

Until the 1950s, birthday parties mostly took place in the home. But around that time, people started branching out and celebrating birthdays and other locations like bowling alleys or pools or restaurants. As time passed, more and more families started to think they were expected to throw birthday parties for kids or wanted to throw birthday parties for kids. And those parties changed to be more focused on kids and their friends, rather than just families. These days, different cultures emphasize certain birthdays where it’s more likely you might have a party or a celebration. In many countries, there’s a birthday that marks a coming of age into adulthood or near adulthood. Sometimes there are laws that allow you to do things like drive a car or vote when you reach a certain age. So those birthdays might have special significance. And as you get much older, there are big milestone birthdays, we call them, when we turn 40, 50, or 60 etc. And you might be more inclined to celebrate on those days.
Jane 08:27
So what's the right way to celebrate birthdays? Well, however you want and however you can.

Natalia 08:34
Hi, my name is Natalia. I'm six years old. I live in Omaha, Nebraska. And my question is, why is my birthday on different days every year? Thank you. Bye.

Madeline 08:46
Hi, my name is Madeline. I am 11 years old. And I live in Mequon, Wisconsin. My question is, every year, why is my birthday always on the same date, but on a different day of the week than the year before?

Jane 08:59
So maybe you've noticed this last year your birthday was on a Saturday, but this year, it's on a Sunday. Or you know you were born on a Friday, so why isn't your birthday always on a Friday? It has to do with the calendar most of the world uses. It's called the Gregorian calendar. You know there are 365 days in most years, and there are seven days in a week. But when you divide 365 by seven, that adds up to 50 seven-day weeks, plus one more day. So if January 1st is a Sunday one year, it will be Monday the next year. Unless of course it's a leap year. Oh yes, every four years we get an extra day in the calendar, February 29th. What's that all about? Well, our human-made calendar days, weeks and years don't exactly line up with the amount of time it takes the earth to orbit the sun. So we add an extra day every four years to realign our calendar with the rotation of the earth. And, actually, in years that end in 00, like 1900, 2100, we don't have a leap year, unless that year is divisible by 400. You know what? It gets really complicated!! At any rate, some of you have an important question about February 29th.

Tyler 10:18
I'm Tyler, and I'm from Minnesota. And my question is, what happens when you're born on February 29th?

Sam 10:27
Hello, my name is Sam. I live in Tampa, Florida. I'm five and a half years old. And my question is, why is there no 29th on February? That's when my birthday is.

Jane 10:46
You know what, Sam? You are extra lucky because you have the rarest birthday of all. After all, that date only comes around every four years. So Leap Year babies are rare. Most people who were born on a Leap Day choose to celebrate their birthday on either February 28th or March 1st on the years where there's no February 29th. Of the regular 365 days of the year, do you know what the least common birthday is? It's actually December 25, also celebrated as Christmas Day by many people. You want to know what's the most common birthday in the United States? It's September 9th. And if you're listening here in the United States, I bet many of you were born in August, because that's the most common month to be born in.

Jane 11:34
Coming up, it wouldn't be a birthday without cake and candles, would it?

BREAK  11:38
BREAK

Jane  11:39
I'm Jane Lindholm and this is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. We’re learning about birthdays today. And for many of us, there's one thing we really look forward to on those days: cake. Okay, well, maybe some of you prefer a totally different treat on your birthday. But cakes are a traditional birthday dessert. Why is that?

Kien  11:59
Hi, my name is Kien. I'm four years old. I live in Silver Spring, Maryland. My question is why don't people get cakes when it's their birthday?

Kien's adult  12:22
Yeah, why do people get cakes on their birthday?

Kien  12:25
Yeah.

Kien's adult  12:26
Yeah.

12:27
I'm Eliza. I live in Wisconsin and I'm three. Why do we get cupcakes every year for birthdays?

Rowan  12:37
Hi, my name is Leo. I'm from Portland, Oregon and why you loved and my question is why do we celebrate birthdays with birthday cakes and candles?

Jane  12:52
A lot of sources say that the Romans were the first to make cakes for special events like weddings and later birthdays. But remember, not everyone even knew when their birthday was back many centuries ago. So only a few people had birthday celebrations that could have included cake. Birthday cakes the way we think of them now first started in 18th century Germany (that's the 1700s) with an event called Kinderfeste, a party for a child! Cakes are made with a lot of butter and sugar and eggs. And those are often pretty expensive ingredients and have been hard to come by at various times. So birthday cakes have been a luxury for many families throughout history. But starting around 1930, cake mixes were invented. Suddenly it was much easier for people to make a cake at home. All you needed were a fresh egg or two and some cooking oil. Add it to the mix, pop it in the oven and voila. That made cakes a little more accessible to a lot more people, which helped grow the tradition. Oh, and candles! Can't forget about those.
Talulah 13:54
I'm Talulah. I'm a and I live in Panama City Beach, Florida. And I want to know why birthday cakes have candles on them.

Ellis 14:03
Hi, my name is Ellis. I'm five years old. I live in Malaysia. And my question is why do we have candles on our birthday cake?

Victoria 14:15
My name is Victoria. I live in Oakland, California. I am six and a half years old. I want to know why do we light candles for someone's birthday? Does everyone in the world do not or is it different?

Jane 14:30
Part of Kinderfeste, the German event we just mentioned, was adding one birthday candle for each year you were born to the cake. Candles would be left all day to burn through, rather than the birthday person blowing the candles out. And oh my goodness, they must have been pretty big candles to be able to burn all day. Somewhere along the line it became popular for the birthday kid to blow out the candles. We tried to figure out when that particular tradition started and we can't find anything conclusive. But probably it just got passed around as an idea and someone thought, "That's neat!" and started doing it in their family and then on and on and on until it became a much bigger thing. During the COVID pandemic, some people stopped blowing on cakes that everyone else was going to eat from. So I wonder if that tradition has faded a little bit. Or maybe you just put the candles on your individual piece.

Larkin 15:19
My name is Larkin. I am seven years old. I live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And my question is, how do trick candles work?

Jane 15:30
If you've never seen a trick candle, it's a special type of candle that relights after you think you've blown it completely out. How does that work? Well, first, think about how a regular candle burns: there's a fuel, that's the wax part, and there's a wick, that's the string part. Well, the wick looks like a string, but it's usually a braided piece of cotton covered in a salt solution that helps keep it burning. You light the wick and the wick keeps the flame going as it burns the wax. With a trick candle, the wick is coated in a special metal powder, magnesium, that can ignite at cooler temperatures. So you blow the candle out, but there's just a little bit of orangey glow on the wick. So the wick is still burning down just a little bit. And then it hits more magnesium and ignites again. Pretty neat.

Jane 16:20
And that's it for this episode. Now you'll know a little bit more about your birthday for the next time it comes around. And remember, there are all different ways to celebrate--or not celebrate--your birthday. It's totally okay not to have a big celebration, especially if that kind of attention makes you uncomfortable. And some cultures just don't celebrate birthdays at all. Some people might not actually know when their birthday is, for that matter. So let's be respectful of all the different ways people live.
Jane 16:48

Now don't forget, if you have a question about anything, have an adult help you record it and send it to us. It's easy to do on a smartphone using a voice recording app like Voice Memos or Voice Recorder. Be sure to include your first name, your hometown and how old you are. Then have your adult email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. You can find all of this information on our website as well, butwhykids.org, and you can send it right from there. But Why is produced at Vermont Public by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, and distributed by PRX. Our engagement producer is Kianna Haskin. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!