

Flashlight Encyclopedia Article

Flashlight

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Flashlight

Now a common household item, the lowly flashlight was once considered a novel toy. When it was introduced in 1898 at an electrical show in New York, the flashlight weighed more than six pounds, and its battery alone was half a foot long. Although patents for the device were issued to American Electrical Novelty and Manufacturing Co. in the 1890s, no single person has laid claim to its invention. The inventor of the toy electric train, American Joshua Cowen (1880-1965), built a prototype flashlight, but used it merely to illuminate potted flowers. When flashlights were first sold to the public, they were regarded as amazing toys rather than practical appliances. Today's lightweight, powerful flashlights are considerably more convenient and useful, thanks to improvements in light bulbs, batteries, and controls. In most flashlights, which use incandescent electric light bulbs, the light is focused into a narrow beam by a reflector and a lens. Small fluorescent models are also available, and some flashlights use extremely brilliant arc lamps that can illuminate objects in darkness half a mile (.8 km) away. Flashlight bodies can be twisted to fit around corners, worn on bands around the forehead, or hung from tent poles as they become more versatile, lighter and brighter. At Georgia Tech Research Institute scientists are making in radar flashlights that use in microwave technology to detect a human presence through walls that are as much as four feet away.