

What Did They Die From?

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Some Archaic Medical Terms

ague: malarial fever	dropsy of the brain: encephalitis
American plague: yellow fever	encephalitis: inflammation of the brain
apoplexy: paralysis due to stroke	French pox: syphilis
bad blood: syphilis	glandular fever: mononucleosis
bilious fever: typhoid, malaria, or hepatitis	[la] grippe: influenza
biliousness: jaundice	king's evil: tuberculosis of neck and lymph glands
bladder in throat: diphtheria	jail fever: typhus
bloody flux: blood in stools	lung fever: pneumonia
brain fever: meningitis	malignant sore throat: diphtheria
Bright's disease: chronic inflammatory disease of the kidneys	marasmus: progressive wasting away
cachexy: malnutrition	milk sickness: contracted via milk from cattle having eaten white snakeroot
camp fever: typhus	paroxysm: convulsion
canine madness: rabies	phthisis: chronic wasting away; also a name for tuberculosis
catalepsy: seizures	quinsy: tonsillitis
catarrh: discharge from the nose or mouth from a cold or allergy	sloes: milk sickness
chilblain: rash or swelling from the cold	sore throat distemper: diphtheria or quinsy
congestive chills: malaria	summer complaint: diarrhea (usually in children; caused by spoiled milk)
cramp colic: appendicitis	tussis convulsiva: whooping cough
cystitis: inflammation of the bladder	winter fever: pneumonia
dengue: a tropical disease affecting the bones and joints	womb fever: infection in the uterus
dropsy: edema (swelling), often caused by kidney or heart disease	

Some Major Illnesses

Bubonic plague: the Black Death: This is an ancient disease. It became a major killer in the Middle Ages and the century or two afterwards. Fleas carried by rats cause it to spread; hence, it is not contagious. It is characterized by high fever, swollen glands (buboes) in the groin or armpit, violent delirium or coma, gangrenous sores when the buboes break down, and sometimes digestive problems. Death usually occurs within a week, although sometimes longer. There is a very high mortality rate for this disease.

Cholera: Today we call this Asiatic cholera, a bacterial infection caused by feces contaminating water or food and is one of the enteric fevers. (Enteric describes the alimentary canal; the path between mouth and rectum through which food travels.) The illness comes on suddenly. Victims suffer great pain, vomiting, diarrhea, and gross dehydration. When diarrhea and other gastrointestinal symptoms were seen in children, it was often called **cholera infantum**. Typically occurring in warm months (**summer complaint**), death often resulted from dehydration.

Consumption/Phthisis: These are old terms for **tuberculosis**. It was given the name because the disease seemed to consume the human body before the person inevitably died from it. The disease, which is contagious, affects every organ in the body, but especially the lungs.

Malaria: Transmitted by the bite of the *Anopheles* mosquito, malaria is usually a chronic illness. Chills are followed by fever and sweating, and these symptoms come and go. Eventually, the person is weakened and can easily succumb to other diseases.

Smallpox: Now virtually eradicated, it, along with **measles** and **pneumonia**, was the major killer of Native Americans when the Europeans arrived in the New World. This viral infection spreads rapidly and can easily overwhelm the immune system of a child. Related to the much milder cowpox, once a person had one of these diseases, they could not contract the other.

Syphilis: Systemic but not always fatal, syphilis is a lifelong illness. Passed from mother to unborn child or by bodily fluids, including innocent kissing, its effects are devastating. First stage is a **chancre** or sore in the mouth or on the genitals. This goes away by itself after a few weeks. Second stage is flu-like symptoms, usually followed by a rash. This, too, goes away. The person then goes into a deceptive latency. He/she seems disease-free but is highly contagious. The longer the period of latency, the less infectious the person becomes. Finally, however, if left untreated, the person goes into the third stage, in which the disease enters the nervous system (**CNS or neurosyphilis**), the heart (**luetic heart disease**), and brain. The latter causes personality changes, general paralysis, and insanity (**GPI or paresis**), and finally, death. Today, this disease is highly treatable with antibiotics if caught in its early stages.

Typhoid fever: Another enteric fever, caused by contaminated water, this was a major killer of soldiers on the battlefield and of people drinking water into which excrement had leaked. Like cholera, typhoid causes terrible digestive system problems.

Typhus: This is a disease of filth. The organism responsible is carried by lice and is transmitted to humans via the waste matter and the crushed bodies of the lice. Warfare, famine, and poverty lead to epidemics of typhus, which can be fatal. Symptoms include high fever, delirium, and rash. **Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever** is a variant of typhus, but not as serious as true typhus.

Yellow fever (yellow jack): This often-fatal illness is caused by the bite of the *Aedes* mosquito. High fever, jaundice, vomiting, diarrhea, and exhaustion are characteristic. Once a patient has survived an attack, he/she is immune to the illness.

Comparisons

	1907	2023/2024
Infant Mortality Rate:	9.9%	5.6% (U.S. only)
Life Expectancy, Men:	45.6 years	75.7 years (U.S. only)
Women:	49.9 years	80.8 years (U.S. only)

Major Causes of Death

1. Pneumonia & Flu	1. Heart Disease
2. Tuberculosis	2. Cancer
3. Heart Disease	3. Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease
4. Diarrhea	4. Stroke
5. Stroke	5. Accidents
6. Kidney Disease	6. Alzheimer's Disease
7. Accidents	7. Diabetes
8. Cancer	8. Pneumonia & Flu
9. Premature Birth	9. Kidney Disease
10. Dementia	10. Suicide

1907 statistics: National Center for Health Statistics, 2007; recorded in the AARP Bulletin, June 2007, page 39.

Top 10 Leading Causes of Death: www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/282929.php

Life Expectancy Figures from the Social Security website: <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/2024/lr5a4.html>

Infant Mortality Figures from the March of Dimes website: <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/united-states/report-card>

Resources

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A Glossary of Archaic Medical Terms Used in the 18th and 19th Centuries

<https://www.thornber.net/medicine/html/medgloss.html> (Comprehensive list of old medical terms. Maintained by a man in Cheshire, England, but quite relevant to the U.S. as well.)

Cyndi's List: Medical & Medicine—Diseases & Medical Terms

<http://www.cyndislist.com/medical/diseases>

Medical Terminology: Diseases—Genealogy Quest

<http://genealogy-quest.com/glossary-terms/diseases/>

