

## Learn About Medieval Medicine

<http://www.learner.org/interactives/middleages/healtact2.html>

Medicine was often a risky business. Bloodletting was a popular method of restoring a patient's health and "humors." Early surgery, often done by barbers without anesthesia, must have been excruciating.

### Who was Treated and Who Did the Treating

Medical treatment was available mainly to the wealthy, and those living in villages rarely had the help of doctors, who practiced mostly in the cities and courts. Remedies were often herbal in nature, but also included ground earthworms, urine, and animal excrement. Many medieval medical manuscripts contained recipes for remedies that called for hundreds of therapeutic substances--the notion that every substance in nature held some sort of power accounts for the enormous variety of substances. Many treatments were administered by people outside the medical tradition. Coroners' rolls from the time reveal how lay persons often made sophisticated medical judgments without the aid of medical experts. From these reports we also learn about some of the major causes of death.

### Humors

Natural functions, such as sneezing, were thought to be the best way of maintaining health. When there was a build-up of any one humor, or body fluid, it could be disposed of through sweat, tears, feces, or urine. When these natural systems broke down, illness occurred. Medieval doctors stressed prevention, exercise, a good diet, and a good environment. One of the best diagnostic tools was uroscopy, in which the color of the patient's urine was examined to determine the treatment. Other diagnostic aids included taking the pulse and collecting blood samples. Treatments ranged from administering laxatives and diuretics to fumigation, cauterization, and the taking of hot baths and/or herbs.

### Surgery

Performed as a last resort, surgery was known to be successful in cases of breast cancer, fistula, hemorrhoids, gangrene, and cataracts, as well as tuberculosis of the lymph glands in the neck (scrofula). The most common form of surgery was bloodletting; it was meant to restore the balance of fluids in the body. Some of the potions used to relieve pain or induce sleep during the surgery were themselves potentially lethal. One of these consisted of lettuce, gall from a castrated boar, briony, opium, henbane, and hemlock juice--the hemlock juice could easily have caused death.

## Try Your Hand at Medieval Medicine!

Here's your chance to try to diagnose and cure patients as if you were a doctor in the Middle Ages. There are three patients for you to cure. Read about their symptoms and then decide what treatment to prescribe. If you like, you can read [more about the symptoms and healing methods](#) of the time.

## **First Patient**

Your patient has black and blue blotches all over her body. You are fairly certain it is the plague. What treatment do you prescribe?

1. Apply sterile egg whites.
2. Give the patient a treacle.
3. Swaddle the patient and shave the sign of the cross into her head.

2. Most medieval medicines were "simples" made of herbal ingredients, which were taken raw or in teas. One medicine that apothecaries (forerunners of chemists and pharmacists) dispensed was called "treacle" (theriac). Treacle was considered a cure-all. It was said to prevent internal swellings, cure fevers, unblock internal stoppages, alleviate heart problems, epilepsy, and palsy, get rid of blemishes, induce sleep, improve digestion, strengthen limbs, heal wounds, remedy snake bites, cure prolapsed uteruses, and cure the plague.

The formula for treacle stems from a recipe developed by the Greek physician Galen and includes more than 60 ingredients, including the roasted skin of vipers. It took 40 days to make and 12 years to mature.

## **Second Patient**

Your patient has taken to his bed with chills, a fever, and a terrible headache. When you examine him, you find pimple-like spots covering his skin. Your diagnosis is smallpox, a contagious disease common in your time.

How will you treat this patient?

1. Soak a piece of linen in a mixture of peony root and rose oil and apply it to the affected areas.
2. Have the patient eat chicken broth.
3. Wrap the patient in red cloth and drape red hangings around his bed.

3. Draping colored cloths from the bed and around a person infected with smallpox was a treatment that may have been related to magic and witchcraft. Or it could have been related to that fact that smallpox patients suffered from photophobia--the colored cloths may have protected them from the light.

Black magic, the occult, witchcraft, and necromancy (the last derived from the ancient Egyptians) were used both as remedies and as means of creating illnesses, even death. However, anyone engaging in these practices could be tried, imprisoned, or executed.

Astrology played a role in health and medicine in the later Middle Ages. It became especially important after the Black Death, when it was relied upon to forecast the spread of the disease. A person born under a sign of the moon, for example, might be prone to worry, frequent colds, and insanity, whereas people born under other signs of the zodiac could be prone to skin diseases or phlegmatic.

### **Last Patient**

You have a patient who is showing all the signs of having leprosy, what do you prescribe for the treatment?

1. Have the patient attend his own funeral and banish him to a colony?
2. Amputate one of the patient's limbs?
3. Mix vinegar, sulfur, and oil and place on affected area

1. Epidemics struck repeatedly in the Middle Ages. People suffered from many diseases, including smallpox, dysentery, leprosy, respiratory illnesses, malaria, and syphilis. In those times, people died from measles, scarlet fever, and tuberculosis.

Leprosy was thought to be extremely contagious, though today we know it isn't contagious at all. Lepers were classed with heretics, Jews, homosexuals, prostitutes, pimps, and any others on the margins of society. When in public, lepers announced themselves by sounding bells and rattles to warn people away. Not allowed to touch food, in the marketplace, lepers had to point to their food choices with staffs.

A person suspected of having leprosy was made to renounce the "normal" world and had to promise to abide by many restrictions. These restrictions included not touching anything or anyone, except for his or her spouse. Thousands were sent to leper colonies scattered all over Europe. These colonies, called "leprosaria," were operated by religious and municipal authorities. For some the leprosaria may not have been totally unbearable places. Lepers who had money could live in a leprosarium with their wives and children. Wealthy merchants often left money to the leper colonies in their wills.