

# WHAT OUR ANCESTORS FEARED MOST: DISEASES AND THEIR TREATMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

The baby is running a fever, your head is pounding, strange welts are popping up on your child's body, your spouse is coughing uncontrollably . . . what to do? Urgent care? Family doctor? Emergency room? "Doctor on demand" app? Acupuncture? Chiropractic? Detail the symptoms on Facebook (someone is sure to get you in the right direction)?

Even though we deal with insurance hassles and long lines at an urgent care facility, there are answers; people who know how to help *are* available. And while we wait for an appointment, there are OTC (over the counter) remedies to ease the discomfort a bit.

Our ancestors were not as fortunate. Their options were limited and, in some cases, non-existent. An illness that, today, would be handled in advance with a vaccination or at the onset with some "miracle" drug (that we take for granted in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) was a certain death sentence to our forebears. And some of those deaths were long-coming and agonizing, with the primary caregiver likely suffering the same ailment. The word "plague" comes from the Latin *plaga*, meaning "blow, strike" – as in the striking down of people by a disease, as we use it today.

When was the last time you saw a yellow flag flying at or posted on the door of one of your neighbors? Most of us have not had that experience, though it is still in play as an option of communicating "This house is under quarantine." The word is derived from the period of time a ship, suspected to carry diseased passengers, is to be kept isolated from those in port: 40 days. This dates back to the Middle Ages and the term *quaranta giorni* (same meaning), meant to protect those in the port cities and surrounding regions from epidemics of the plague, in particular.  
(<http://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/historyquarantine.html>)

**Definitions** (<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/epidemic-vs-pandemic-vs-endemic/>)

"-dem" means "people" or "district," from the Greek *demos*

"Pan-" means "all"

"Epi-" means "among"

"En-" means "in"

*Epidemic* – a disease that is spread among the people or region during a given time period

*Pandemic* – a disease that is spread beyond a specific region, affecting (and infecting) a great many people (often globally)

*Endemic* – a disease (or "condition") that is contained within an area or specific group of people

**What diseases worried our ancestors?** (<http://www.healthcarebusinessstech.com/the-10-deadliest-epidemics-in-history/> and other resources provided for the specific subcategories)

### **What other conditions might have been issues for our multi-great-grandparents?**

Gas gangrene  
Pneumonia  
Rabies  
Tetanus

### **HOW DID MY ANCESTOR DIE?**

Death certificates often give specific causes of death, but also may provide “contributory cause(s)” or a doctor might identify for what his/her patient was being treated (would this possibly lead to death or a contributory cause?). Sometimes just a code is provided. To understand more about the “Death Codes” or ICD Codes, check the following websites:

<https://familyhistorydaily.com/free-genealogy-resources/icd-codes-death-certificates-genealogy/>  
<http://health.mo.gov/data/mica/DeathMICA/icd9-10.html>

### **STATE BY STATE EPIDEMICS/ENDEMIC**

Because diseases are often localized, your ancestor may have suffered from an illness you were unaware of simply because it didn’t reach major epidemic or pandemic proportions. Check the locales where your family lived to see if an endemic disease might have been prevalent at a particular time (especially helpful if trying to locate a child you suspect had been born but died in childhood and whose death might be recorded in a cemetery record). Also, check the contributory causes for deaths on death certificates . . . a person might have died of pneumonia or heart attack but been ill from some other disease, which would have led to the respiratory condition or heart failure. Keep in mind that, during a major epidemic or other disaster (e.g., many deaths from an earthquake, tornado, etc.), burials may have been *en masse* and records non-existent.

SOME state-wide (or city-wide) epidemics/endemics are listed on the following table. Information gathered from

<http://www.joycetice.com/articles/epidemics.htm>  
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~buce/drawer-epidemics.htm>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_epidemics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics)  
<http://genealogytrails.com/del/epidemics.htm>

Note: If a state is not listed, it does not mean there was freedom from disease – illnesses may not have been reported or recorded (some people would deny a family member’s illness, also, to avoid quarantine, banishment from the village or region, or panic in the community). They might be affected as others in a larger area, e.g., North America or “other” (meaning that the specific region is not clarified). Also, consider various outbreaks of certain illnesses due to various circumstances (e.g., flooding will lead to outbreaks of cholera, war will result in all types of diseases from malaria to typhoid fever, etc.); many of these are not clearly reflected in the chart. Always consider the bigger picture when trying to determine if an ancestor or the family was affected by some outbreak that might be overlooked if the time period, weather, region, natural vulnerability, and other factors are overlooked.



	Chol	Diph	Flu	Msls	ScarF	S/P	TF	TYPH	YF	OTHER
LA					1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	1841, 47,52, 65-73, 78	
MD	1865-73	1735-40	1732-33, 1761	1713-15	1735-40	1689-90, 1735-40				
MA/ Boston		1735-40	1732-33, 1761	1657, 87 1713-15,29, 39-40	1659, 1735-40, 1865-73	1633, 48-49, 77-78, 89-90, 1702-03, 15-30, 35-40, 60-61, 1864-73	1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	
MI				1713-15						
MN	1851			1713-15		1837-38				
MS									1841	
MO	1851									
MT	1851					1837-38				
NE	1851					1837-38				
NH		1735-40	1732-33, 1761	1713-15,	1735-40	1735-40				
NJ		1735-40, 1878	1732-33, 1761	1713-15						
NM	1851					1837-38				
NY/ NYC	1832, 34			1713-15,47, 88	1769, 1865-73	1702, 23-30, 1865-73	1865-73, 1903	1865-73	1690, 1732, 1803, 65-73	
NC									1784, 1841	
ND	1851					1837-38				
OH	1833			1713-15						
OK	1851					1837-38				

	Chol	Diph	Flu	Msls	ScarF	S/P	TF	TYPH	YF	OTHER
RI		1735-40	1732-33, 1761	1713-15	1735-40	1616, 28-31,38, 89-90, 1715-25, 35-40, 60-61				
SC			1732-33, 1761	1713-15, 47		1699, 1711-12, 38, 60-61,			1699, 1706, 32, 1841	
SD	1851					1837-38				
TN	1865-73				1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	1841, 65-73	
TX	1851					1837-38			1867	
VT		1735-40	1793		1735-40	1735-40				
VA			1732-33, 61, 93	1713-15		1679-80, 96			1734, 41	
WI	1849			1713-15						
WY	1851					1837-38				
North Amer	1831-32, 48-49		1732-33,61, 1847-48,50-52,57-59,61, 73-76, 89-90, 1918-20, 57-58	1759, 72					1841, 50, 55	1775 (N.E.), 1820-23, 1916 & 1952 (Polio)
OTHER					1865-73		1865-73	1865-73	1865-73	